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June 2016

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FROM THE EDITOR

Euro 2016 is almost upon us and we've followed up last month's special team guide with a bumper collection of interviews, featuring the coach and a key player from each of the 24 finalists (page 25).

Player interviews are increasingly difficult to set up and conduct, but the common theme of this month's interviews is the desire that remains among players to perform for their country. Players are often criticised for being one-dimensional, but that is often the fault of the clubs who place such a tight restriction on how and what they can communicate.

> The common theme of this month's interviews is the desire among players to perform for their country

Many of the answers from both players and coaches may appear similar, but reading between the lines they provide a fascinating insight ahead of the tournament.

Because of the interest in Euro 2016, and the need to preview the Copa America (page 76), our annual review of the European season will feature in the July issue. Please also keep an eye out for a *World Soccer* special publication, England '66. It's a celebration of the 50th anniversary of England's World Cup victory, featuring many previously unseen colour photographs, as well as an extended essay by Brian Glanville.

Gavin Hamilton, Editor

10 SIGNIFICANT EVENTS THIS MONTH

1 Euro 2016 kick off ..... page 25
2 Centenial Copa America takes place in USA ..... page 76
3 Infantino hosts first FIFA congress ..... page 20
4 Leicester win the Premier League ..... page 15
5 Luis Suarez wins Golden Shoe ..... page 10
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7 Chinese sides crash out of Asian Champions League ..... page 90
8 Holders River Plate knocked out of Libertadores Cup ..... page 88
9 Club America win the CONCACAF Champions League ..... page 92
10 Adelaide United win Australia's A-League ..... page 85

SPAIN

Suarez claims Golden Shoe

Barcelona forward Luis Suarez is on course to win the ESM Golden Shoe after finishing the Spanish Liga season with 40 goals, four clear of closest rival Gonzalo Higuain of Napoli.

Suarez, who was the joint-winner in 2014 with Cristiano Ronaldo, scored four more goals than Ronaldo (winner in 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2015) and 14 more than Lionel Messi (winner in 2010, 2012 and 2013).

Diego Forlan (Atletico Madrid, 2009) was the last winner not to play for Barcelona or Real Madrid.

The final standings will appear in next month's European season review issue of *World Soccer*.

STANDINGS AS AT 16.05.16

1 Luis Suarez (Barcelona) 40 x 2 = 80pts
2 Gonzalo Higuain (Napoli) 36 x 2 = 72
3 Cristiano Ronaldo (Real Madrid) 35 x 2 = 70

"The Rostov Meldonium allegations have been totally invented"

Russian minister of sport, Valeri Mutko, hits out at FIFA after domestic league contenders Rostov are subjected to a drug test

Golden boy... Luis Suarez

4 Jonas (Benfica) 32 x 2 = 64
5 Robert Lewandowski (Bayern) 30 x 2 = 60
6 Zlatan Ibrahimovic (PSG) 38 x 1.5 = 57
7 Islam Slimani (Sporting) 27 x 2 = 54
8 Lionel Messi (Barcelona) 26 x 2 = 52
9= P-E Aubameyang (B Dortmund) 25 x 2 = 50
9= Harry Kane (Tottenham) 25 x 2 = 50

Farewell...Zlatan Ibrahimovic signed off at PSG with 38 goals

HEROES & VILLAINS

Historic...coach Chan Yuen-ting won a men's league title

CHAN YUEN-TING

The 27-year-old, who is younger than many of the team she coaches, became the first woman to lead a men's team to a national top-flight championship, leading Eastern Sports Club to the Hong Kong Premier League title.

RIYAD MAHREZ

The Algerian, who has starred for title winners Leicester City this season, became the first African to win the PFA Player of the Year award in England.

LUUK DE JONG

Scored twice for PSV as they beat PEC Zwolle 3-1 on the final day of the Eredivisie season to become the first player in the Dutch league since Mateja Kezman in 2002-03 to score over 25 goals in a campaign. More importantly, the win helped snatch the title from Ajax, who surprisingly could only draw 1-1 away to second from bottom De Graafschap.

GONZALO HIGUAIN

Scored a hat-trick on the last day of the season, in Napoli's 4-0 win against Frosinone, to set a new Serie A record of 36 goals for the season.

Record...Gonzalo Higuain set a Serie A best

MICHEL PLATINI

The former UEFA boss failed in his bid to have his six-year-ban from football quashed at the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

TRABZONSPOR FANS

Trabzonspor's Turkish league game at home to Fenerbahce had to be abandoned when a number of their supporters attacked the assistant referee. They also tore down safety netting from behind one of the goals and threw objects onto the pitch. The club were later ordered to play four home matches behind closed doors.

Trouble...Tranzonspor's game had to be abandoned

ANDRIY YARMOLENKO

The Dynamo Kiev winger kicked Ukraine team-mate Taras Stepanenko of Shakhtar Donetsk when he kissed his club badge and celebrated in front of opposition fans during his side's 3-0 win. Both players were sent off and Stepanenko later said: "I'd like the whole country to know my friendship with Yarmolenko has ended."

TOBIAS SANA

The Malmo substitute threw a corner flag into the crowd of Gothenburg fans in retaliation after having objects thrown at him.

Retaliation...Tobias Sana reacts to fans' provocation

"The day he realises he can't look down on his team-mates, staff and coach, he will perhaps find a way to get back in"

Croatia boss Ante Cacic (left) drops Liverpool defender Dejan Lovren from his Euro 2016 plans for demanding a guaranteed start

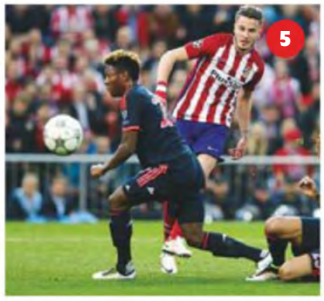
GOALS we'd like to see again

To see video footage of these goals, and many more that we have selected, scan the QR code using any free QR reader that can be downloaded to your smartphone. You can also see the videos by logging on to http://po.st/NKJebL

1 MARLONE
Corinthians v Cobresal
Traps the ball on his chest then volleys spectacularly into the net in the Libertadores Cup.

2 MIGUEL ALMIRON
Lanus v Banfield
Put through on goal by Maximiliano Velazquez, he produces a delicate chip over the advancing goalkeeper during an Argentinian league game.

3 JAVI GOMEZ
Socuellamos v Toledo
An amazing bicycle kick from 30 yards to decide this Spanish third-tier game.



4 LIONEL MESSI
Barcelona v Espanyol
Left-footed free-kick from 25 yards out that curls away from the goalkeeper and into the top corner.

5 SAUL NIGUEZ
Atletico Madrid v Bayern Munich
Fine solo goal to give Atletico a slender lead in the Champions League semi-final first leg.

6 ANDERSON PICO
Dnipro v Oleksandria
An explosive free-kick from 35 yards, hit with the outside of his right boot into the top corner.

WINNERS

BAYERN MUNICH
Became the first team to win four consecutive Bundesliga crowns.

GUILLERMO AMOR
The 48-year-old former Barcelona youth academy boss led Adelaide United to a first A-League title in his debut campaign as a head coach.

BESIKTAS
Claimed their first league championship in Turkey for seven years – a month after moving into their new stadium.

LOSERS

LEWIS KINSELLA
The Aston Villa defender, on loan at non-league Kidderminster Harriers, suffered two relegations on the same day.

O'HIGGINS
The Chilean club lost at home for the first time in 15 months to hand the title to Universidad Catolica.

DUNDEE UNITED
A 2-1 loss to next-door neighbours and rivals Dundee, condemned the club to relegation from the Scottish Premier League.

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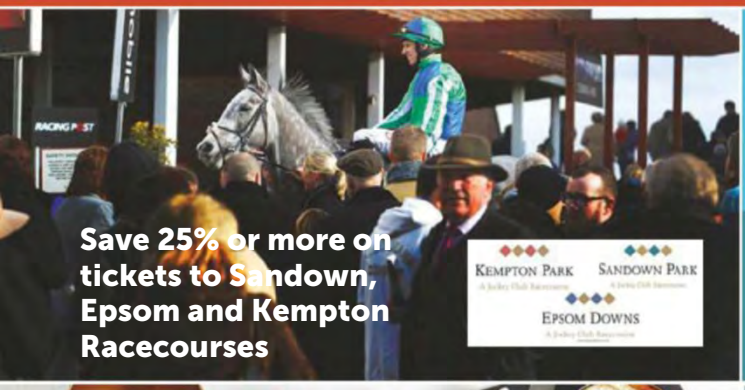

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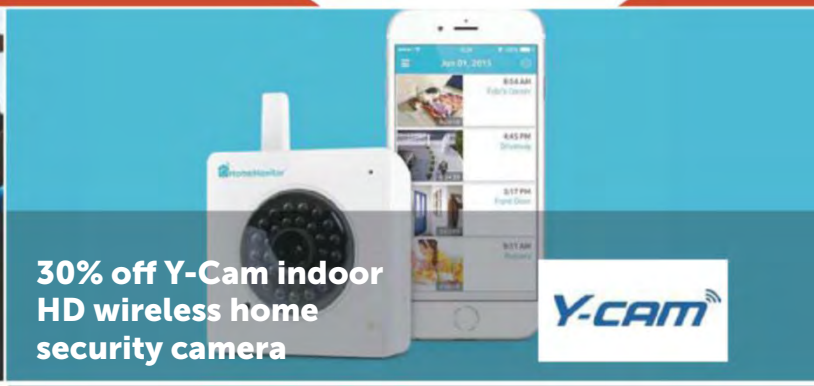

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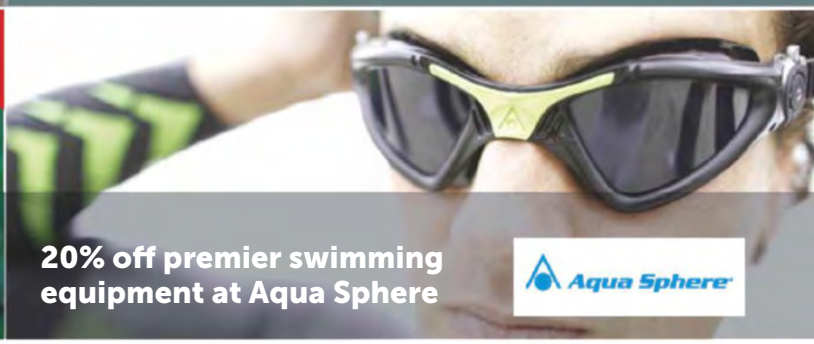

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Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Ranieri's brilliance at the heart of Leicester miracle

There has never been a day in football quite like the coronation of Leicester City as champions of the Premier League. The party started at dawn and drew in revellers from all round the world – not least the tenor Andrea Bocelli who volunteered to serenade the crowd before kick-off.

The power of the occasion was illustrated by the supreme pride on the face of Leicester manager Claudio Ranieri as he guided Bocelli out to the centre of the pitch. The glory of the moment was summed up perfectly by a young Italian football fan who had travelled to the match along with hundreds of his compatriots.

"Leicester are the team of everyone," he said. "They have overcome all obstacles. They are a symbol of anti-system soccer."

Ranieri's intelligently crafted team had less possession than almost every other club through 38 matches of the Premier League season. They had a desperately poor passing percentage rate. They had one of the lowest wage bills for players. They had spent less on transfer fees in their entire 132-year history than Manchester United had in the previous two seasons.

They broke all the rules. Their triumph should have been impossible.

What made them such a delight was that the anti-system was also great fun. They were not a cynical, negative football team that sucked the joy from sport while winning matches. They played with a rare spirit, and they scored fabulous goals and they had a manager who charmed the birds from the trees and never played mind games with opponents or traduced referees.

Leicester's story is perfect for the modern world of rebellion against the powerful elites.

In politics this is played out through anti-establishment parties and demagogues, often at the extremes of the right-wing or left-wing spectrum. The difference with the modest football team of Wes Morgan and Danny Drinkwater is that they have universal appeal.

Many have tried to find a comparison in the history of football. Some said it was like the 1992 fairy tale of Denmark, who returned from their holiday beaches to win the European Championship when granted last-minute entry to the tournament. Yet the Danes, as delightful as they were, only had to play five matches to lift the trophy – and only had to win two of those in normal time.

Premier kings...Kasper Schmeichel crowns Claudio Ranieri

> "Leicester spent less on transfer fees in their entire 132-year history than Manchester United had in the previous two seasons"

Others reckoned the similarity was with Atletico Madrid, but that is just absurd. Atletico have always been one of the powerhouses: 10 times winners of La Liga, 10 times Spanish Cup victors and, oh yes, two Champions League Finals in three years.

No, the miracle of Leicester is unique, which is why it was celebrated with such gusto.

Obscure players like Riyad Mahrez and N'Golo Kante, who had languished in the lower leagues of France, became instant stars. Goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel escaped from the giant shadow of his father, Peter, and striker Jamie Vardy's life story is set to become a Hollywood movie.

At the heart of the matter, crucially, was the understated brilliance of Ranieri, who solved the team's defensive problems early on, guided them in the art of the counter-attack and who kept the pressure off the players with expert handling of the outside world.

Ranieri's appointment last summer had been widely scorned, typical of the insular attitude of English football. Critics cited his previous job, a miserable failure as coach of Greece, rather than assess a career that has encompassed spells at Juventus, Chelsea, Internazionale, Valencia, Napoli, Atletico Madrid, Roma and Monaco.

His immense experience made the difference and he could handle the heat of the fire when his unheralded club climbed to the top of the Premier League in mid-winter.

He was a man of the people for the team of the people. So many tales are being told about the legend of Leicester, but surely the best is the one about Ranieri on the day the title was clinched.

He went to Rome to have lunch with his 96-year-old mother, dining on steak and strawberries, and talking nothing of football, before flying back to Leicester at teatime to watch the 2-2 draw between Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur that settled the destiny of an amazing season. WS

"I wasn't the only one who didn't know how to speak. Most footballers are ignorant"

Ex-Italy striker Toto Schillaci recalls in his autobiography how Juventus made him work with a teacher of Italian

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Appointments, sackings and loans

IN

Advice...Harry Redknapp has joined Central Coast Mariners

EUROPE

Juventus took up their option to sign on-loan midfielder **MARIO LEMINA** from Marseille for an initial fee of €9.5million.

Uruguayan coach **GUS POYET**, who left Greek side AEK Athens in April, agreed a two-year deal to take charge of La Liga side Real Betis.

RENE GIRARD replaced Michel Der Zakarian as coach of Nantes.

ELISHA LEVI, who led Maccabi Haifa to two domestic titles and the 2009-10 Champions League group stage, was named coach of Israel. **SLAVOLJUB MUSLIN** replaced Radovan Curcic in charge of Serbia.

Despite winning only one of his eight games as interim boss of the Northern Irish side, **PAT MCGIBBON** was appointed Portadown manager on a two-year deal.

SOUTH AMERICA

Former Argentina striker **MARTIN PALERMO** was named coach of Chilean club Union Espanola.

Paraguay's under-20 boss **GUSTAVO MORINIGO** was appointed coach of Cerro Porteno, with **HUMBERTO PAREDES** handed temporary control of the national junior side.

CONCACAF

Former England midfielder **JOE COLE** joined USA second-tier side Tampa Bay Rowdies after being released by League One side Coventry City.

In charge...Martin Palermo

AFRICA

GEBREMEDIHIN HAILE was appointed Ethiopia's interim coach following Yohannes Sahle's dismissal.

ASIA

Australia international **RHYS WILLIAMS**, 27, joined Perth Glory from newly promoted Premier League side Middlesbrough.

Former Tottenham Hotspur and QPR manager **HARRY REDKNAPP,** who took charge of Jordan for two World Cup qualifiers in March, will work for A-League side Central Coast Mariners as a consultant.

EUROPE

Everton, who lost in the semi-finals of the FA Cup and League Cup this season, sacked manager **ROBERTO MARTINEZ**. Watford parted company with **QUIQUE SANCHEZ FLORES**.

Schalke coach **ANDRE BREITENREITER** stepped down at the end of the Bundesliga season.

Verona striker **LUCA TONI**, who was a World Cup winner with Italy in 2006, retired at the age of 38.

Marseille dismissed coach **MICHEL** after a run of 10 Ligue 1 games without a win.

MARKO NIKOLIC parted company with Slovenian league leaders Olimpija after he was banned for racially abusing one of his own players.

GHEORGHE HAGI stepped down as coach of Viitorul Constanta, the Romanian club he owns, in order "to analyse the situation."

SAMI HYYPIA left Zurich the day after the 12-time champions slumped to last place in the Swiss league.

RONNY DEILA stepped down as manager of Scottish champions Celtic, while **MIXU PAATELAINEN** left relegated Dundee United.

ANDREY KOBELEV had his contract as coach of Dynamo Moscow cancelled.

STOYCHO STOEV left Levski Sofia by mutual consent after they failed to win the Bulgarian league.

SOUTH AMERICA

DARIO FRANCO resigned as Colon coach after a poor run in the Argentinian Primera games.

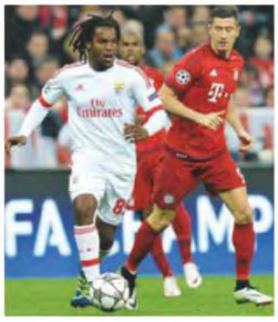
AFRICA

ALEX MCLEISH became the fourth coach to leave Egyptian club Zamalek this season.

According to Ghanaian club Medeama, their Swedish coach **TOM STRAND** "checked out of his hotel room without our consent" after a CAF Confederation Cup defeat and left a resignation note in his room.

OUT

Quit...Luca Toni



Talent...18-year-old Renato Sanches

Double swoop for Bayern

Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich are already making plans for next season, agreeing a deal for Borussia Dortmund skipper **MATS HUMMELS** and signing **RENATO SANCHES** from Benfica for an initial fee of €35million.

Fresh start...Frank De Boer won the Eredivisie four times

De Boer leaves Ajax

FRANK DE BOER, who led Ajax to four Eredivisie championships in a row, between 2011 and 2014, stepped down after missing out on this season's title.

Paul GARDNER

THE WORLDWIDE VIEW

Respect to Elleray for re-writing the rule book

Acrobatic...Derlis Gonzalez of Paraguay

The revision job that David Elleray and his colleagues have done on the soccer rule book is a remarkable achievement. Not least because it marks the first time in living memory the IFAB has itself initiated a move toward modernity.

The new book does conform, by and large, with the stated aims of making the rules "more easily understood by everyone in football" and "appropriate for the modern game at all levels".

That sounds straightforward enough. But it must have presented a daunting challenge for someone taking on the challenge of hacking their way through over 100 years of IFAB sloth, secrecy, sloppiness and self-satisfaction.

Elleray and co have gone a long way toward bringing order to this chaos, but there is still plenty to do.

The first obstacle along the path to rule-book sanity was evidently – and unfortunately – self-imposed. The revisionists have aligned themselves with the IFAB's fanciful version of its own worth. In a brief "History of the IFAB" the rule book now tells us that "steadily the IFAB changed the game and the mindset of those who played and watched it".

But you couldn't get much further from the truth if you tried. IFAB's claim to be a pro-active force in the game is laughable – or would be, were it not for the fact that the re-writers of the rules betray signs of believing that they are continuing an honourable IFAB tradition, when they are actually cleaning up the mess that IFAB has assembled.

> "IFAB's claim to be a pro-active force in the game is laughable"

This extensive rewrite, of course, depends on words; the correct use of the correct words – which is important when one is dealing, as here, with an official, quasi-legal document. I have a test for that. If the authors use "prior to" when they mean "before", they fail.

Elleray and co are off to a flying start. No sign of "prior to". The language avoids the pompous. Avoiding ambiguity is vital, too, but the writers do less well here. The word "sanction" appears (by my count) 14 times, as both verb and noun. But "sanction" is a notorious problem word, a contronym, a word with two, contradictory meanings. In his wonderful book *The Mother Tongue*, Bill Bryson uses "sanction" as his prime example of a contronym: "Sanction...can either signify permission to do something or a measure forbidding it to be done." The new rule book uses it throughout in the second sense but, for clarity's sake, it is a word best avoided.

A tricky one for Elleray, because the obvious verb here is "penalise". Alas, the noun would then be "penalty", which already has a very specific soccer meaning. More confusion. Punish and punishment seem to me the best words to use.

Sharp definitions are also crucial. To include short definitions of careless, reckless and excessive force near the beginning of Rule 12 is an excellent move – but doesn't look quite so good when you turn the page and find a reference to "playing in a dangerous manner", which also needs, but does not get, a definition.

The sharpest indication that the editors have opted for transparency is a new section giving details of rule changes. In the past new rules were simply announced. Here we get the old wording printed alongside the new, and an explanation of why the change was made. OK, the explanations are not always too revealing, but it is this willingness to discuss the rules that matter – coming from an organisation traditionally operating in autocratic secrecy.

Traces of that approach linger in the revised rules, as do moments revealing the IFAB'S overwhelmingly British mindset. In Rule 12, for instance, we find that "a scissors or bicycle kick is permissible" – a grammatical structure strongly suggesting that the writers believe the two terms to be synonyms for the same type of kick. I suspect these reminders of an embarrassing past will not be banished until the IFAB itself is reformed into oblivion.

For the moment, the work of Elleray and his colleagues is to be commended as a huge first step toward that reform.

It is a beginning, with much more to be done. WS

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

From hero to zero: Platini's dramatic fall from grace

Fall...after moving into UEFA's offices, Michel Platini wanted to be a Blatteresque executive president

Michel Platini was a breath of fresh air when he dribbled his way through Lennart Johansson's defence to win the UEFA presidential election in 2007. The European federation had built an image as a highly efficient, cash-generating, unloved business operation for which football was little more than a product, while Platini was an amiable campaigner with revisionist ideas and a track record of glory which tended to blind voters and media alike.

Initially, Platini had wanted to take the Champions League back to the old knockout formula. That was until, some way down the campaigning trail, the facts of financial life were explained to him.

How ironic it was that missing a trick over money – or seeking to be too clever or avaricious or power-hungry – would eventually bring his football career to a bitter end.

Platini's main proposals – widening access to the Champions League plus financial fairplay and the expansion of the Euro finals to 24 teams – were all generally welcomed. The way it worked, he came up with the ideas and Gianni Infantino devised the methodology.

A phalanx of hand-picked supporters from the smaller national associations were only too happy to collect their expenses as they rocked up for their committee meetings. That was fine, to a point. But then came the challenge of constraining his own power. And Platini, increasingly, could not.

During his three years as Blatter's football counsellor at FIFA, between 1998 and 2002, Platini's power was limited. He was "merely" appointed, not elected. Along the way he deserves credit for leading the creation of the unified international calendar with its precision over enforced player release. But the more he worked with Blatter, the more he fell under the spell which demanded not only the use but the abuse of power.

> "[Platini] went off the rails and we could not put him back on"

As so, as soon as Platini moved into Nyon, he undid UEFA's administrative set-up. He wanted to be a Blatteresque executive president – almost as if he were practising for the day when he moved from one, European, throne to that of the world. Game of thrones, indeed.

More and more, Platini became enmeshed by the complexities of a FIFA sphere poisoned increasingly by the endemic corruption of its culture with Blatter's acquiescence.

William Gaillard, brought in by Platini as media controller then personal adviser, noted in a recent book how Platini's power games set him on a descent into the inferno. "He went off the rails and we [his friends] could not put him back on the rails," said Gaillard.

The critical point, when Platini slipped beyond reach, was in 2011 when he accepted the notorious SFr2m "disloyal payment" from FIFA on Blatter's orders for who-knows-what.

Was it really a delayed payment from nine years earlier which everyone had forgotten? Was it connected with Platini refusing to stand against Blatter that year for the presidency? Was it something else entirely?

Platini and Blatter insist it was the first. But even the Court of Arbitration for Sport, while trimming Platini's ban to four years, stated clearly that the SFr2m did not correlate with any of the paperwork brought forward by Platini's lawyers.

By then Platini's style of presidency had warped beyond all sense with UEFA staff telling how they would find him sitting in the lobby at Nyon checking what time they turned up for work. No one dared confront him over where the president should focus his efforts.

This was a further irony. Last year, on the morning of the grisly congress which saw Blatter re-elected for what proved the last time, Platini claimed to have told Blatter "as a friend" that he should withdraw. Blatter refused. But did Platini listen to his own friends? Apparently not.

As Blatter clung on at FIFA, Platini grew frustrated by blunted ambition and claimed football should be run by "players and not by administrators." Infantino has come close to suggesting as much with his FIFA promotion of "legends" in whose company he salivated at the European club competition draws.

Modern era legends do not come much grander than Michel Platini. Maybe Franz Beckenbauer. Hardly the best of examples. At least Beckenbauer had the grace to admit that he just signed whatever was put in front of him.

Platini has advanced no such excuse. WS

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Brian GLANVILLE

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Infantino is already the wrong man

Sepp Blatter, thank heavens, is at last gone. The devious Jerome Valcke too. But is there anything much to hope for under the newly presidential Gianni Infantino?

He arrives from UEFA hardly trailing clouds of glory and he is far too close, one feels, to Michel Platini, who has been hounded out of office in disgrace, even if his suspension keeps getting cut.

Infantino's disastrous and mindless ambition to increase the complement of future World Cup finals to 40 teams will, one hopes, be speedily abandoned. Meanwhile, his and FIFA's contemptuous behaviour to the press at the recent FIFA conference in Mexico City was an arrogant and all too indicative suggestion of what may be to come.

Needless to say, the Russian World Cup finals of 2018 will go ahead as planned, though the evidence that there has been dirty work at the crossroads is all too manifest. By the same token, not a word about the still more outrageous choice of Qatar for the finals of 2022, the ultimate scandal and one in which Platini's part surely represented a betrayal of this European trust. And it is he, of course, who is responsible for the bloated nature of this year's European Championship finals. That, to my mind, is a far greater offence than the money pocketed from Blatter after that nine-year interval.

FIFA are surely beyond redemption and the appointment as secretary-general of a woman who is the merest nonentity in football terms emphasises it. Fatma Samba Diouf Samoura was working as a United Nations humanitarian co-ordinator. A Senegalese with 21 years of experience of UN programmes, she announced that "today is a wonderful day for me", but it is a ludicrous day for football.

Yes, she is black, yes she is a woman, thereby conforming to the stereotype which Infantino had promised for the post. And no, blessedly, there is no suggestion that she is in any way corrupt.

She believes "this role is a perfect fit for my skill and experience in strategic high-act team-building". Really?

World Cup ambition...FIFA president Gianni Infantino on a recent trip to Doha in Qatar

New deal...John Terry has signed a one-year contract extension

Terry's loyalty is wasted on Chelsea

One of the ironies of the John Terry affair at Chelsea is that, were he disposed to change his mind, he would arguably be the best choice for England at centre-back in the European finals. *Faute de mieux* ("for want of better") you might say, at his advanced age, but look at the sheer poverty of choice available to Roy Hodgson in the centre-back position.

John Stones should have been the answer, yet his form this season for Everton has been such that he is anything but a safe and automatic choice. Indeed, he has also erred expensively when playing for England.

> The dearth of English centre-backs defies analysis. Yet it is not a new phenomenon

Chelsea's treatment of Terry reminds me of the slogan I once coined for the old Fleet Street: "Loyalty's what they shaft you with." Terry is the shining exception to prove the rule; a player actually nurtured and developed at Stamford Bridge rather than bought from elsewhere. The fact that he should stay on a miserably reduced one-year contract emphasises his one-sided devotion to the club.

The dearth of English centre-backs defies analysis. Yet it is not a new phenomenon. Long ago I discussed the crisis with the Everton and England centre-back Brian Labone, who put it down to the habit of playing two centre-backs rather than one. In the halcyon days of Bobby Moore, that used to mean three backs and what you could call a defensive wing-half, such as Moore himself, who was never an orthodox centre-half, aerial combat not being his speciality.

That Terry chose to remain with Chelsea rather than make millions in the wealthy backwater of Chinese football is a testament to his unreciprocated loyalty.

Dejected...Brighton's Biram Kayal

Unlucky Brighton deserved better

Ah, the play-offs. Those perennial travesties of justice. For the third time, unlucky Brighton have been thwarted in the Championship play-offs.

They had finished 15 points ahead of Sheffield Wednesday and just failed to qualify ahead of Middlesbrough, losing out on goal difference.

In the first leg of their play-off, away to Wednesday, Brighton were afflicted with a plethora of injuries which laid them open to a 2-0 defeat. Then, in the second leg in their splendid stadium – achieved after years of bitter exile from the original Goldstone Ground – they failed to capitalise on their first-half dominance, ran out of steam in the second half, were pegged to a 1-1 draw and thus elimination.

These special circumstances emphasised the arbitrary injustice of the play-offs, simply a device for injecting spurious significance into the latter stages of the Football League divisions. Brighton's experience shows, in its injustice, just how spurious an arrangement it is.

Read Brian Glanville's exclusive weekly column at worldsoccer.com

Leicester: a glorious triumph by default

Leicester City's superb achievement in winning the Premier League, for the first time in their history, is also a damning commentary on the state of that league.

Leicester gave abundant hope to the underdogs in a game awash with misspent money, for all their dramatic prowess. Yet it has to be said they won by default.

On the very last day of the league, a mediocre Arsenal team crawled into second place as Tottenham Hotspur collapsed ignominiously against an already relegated Newcastle United.

True, Dele Alli, such a remarkably precocious talent all season, was missing, suspended, from the Spurs team; but five goals? Against 10 men?

Mauricio Pochettino, the wizard eulogised for months, could only seem seriously diminished. And the ultimate irony was that arguably the best player on the pitch was Newcastle's right-winger, Andros Townsend, who Pochettino had not felt good enough for Tottenham.

Vardy's fascinating story deserves a proper voice

At the Football Writers' annual dinner – no, I'm still not a member, but they were kind enough to invite me – I had the pleasure of meeting the remarkable Jamie Vardy and, of course, congratulating him. I said that his coming autobiography should be fascinating and asked who would be helping him with it – his ghost, in other words. To my surprise, he told me he was going to write it on his own.

Would that be wise? Having myself "ghosted" two such autobiographies, *Cliff Bastin Remembers* and goalkeeper Jack Kelsey's *Over the Bar*, I would never write another, but there are many highly competent football writers who could do this fascinating story very well.

A far less interesting figure is Burnley's Joey Barton, who made abundant use of a book of quotations to promote his name on the internet.

To my great amusement and no small surprise, I read that Barton had commissioned as his ghost none other than the *Times*' resident sporting intellectual and former table tennis star, Matthew Syed. "*Nostalgie de la boue*", one thought – Syed will know what that means, Barton can look it up – but it fell through when, surprisingly and humiliatingly, Barton rejected Syed's offering and decided to write the book himself.

There is also talk of Vardy's story being made into a film. I told Vardy that feature films about football had never yet succeeded; not least the fatuous *Escape to Victory* which, for reasons of his obscure own, was directed by the great John Huston. Nobody, I told Vardy, could play you in action, but you.

He modestly disagreed; but what actor could? And how many are pro footballers? A documentary? Yes, that could surely be a success. His story fascinates.

Fascinating...Jamie Vardy's story looks set to be made into a film

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THE EUROS START HERE

EURO 2016 UNCOVERED

In a World Soccer exclusive, we speak to the coach and a key man from every team

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Albania

Strengths
Steel-curtain back line, only conceded five goals in qualification. Pioneering patriotic spirit.

Weaknesses
Shortage of creativity and punch in the final third.

Wild Card
Tricky and explosive teenage right-winger Milot Rashica is making a big impact this term at Vitesse in Holland.

Controversial Player
Main striker Sokol Cikalleshi is willing enough but he has yet to score a competitive international goal.

Special mention
Coach Gianni De Biasi is rumoured to be on the shortlist to succeed Antonio Conte as Italy boss.

Media expectation
No media corps will cheerlead more in France. Despite a lack of firepower, giant-killings are anticipated.

Tournament objectives
De Biasi says qualification for the last 16 would be "extraordinary".

Past Inspiration
A 0-0 draw with West Germany in a Euro qualifier in 1967 – the day the Albanians came of age as a football nation.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Italy. All the fuss surrounding an encounter with his native land will drive the unsentimental De Biasi nuts.

THE COACH: GIANNI DE BIASI

It's been almost five years since you took on the role of Albania coach. Now you're in the Euros and you're a hero. Did you ever expect this?
I hoped so, but it's not normal that a little country like Albania is going to the finals of a European Championship. When I came here I met a very old group of players and it was necessary to make many changes. This was a very problematic situation. In the first two years, I experimented with many players. I had many trips to meet the players and to understand what they thought about the national team. It was really tough work. There are only two players who started my first friendly who are playing for me now. My assistant coach is very important because we did, perhaps, 50 trips, and I did about 21-22 of them. He speaks very good English and, for this reason, it's better he meets with the players. I speak Italian-style English. It's not good enough!

When you arrived, no one expected much. Now everyone is talking about exciting young players, improving the domestic league, getting through your group in France. How do you manage such expectations?
It's important to change the mentality of the people – the journalists, the players – because it's just ask, ask, ask. They want to ride to the moon on a bicycle! This is the big problem. For me, this situation is normal; it's the same as club football. When I was with Torino in Serie B they were going through a financial crisis. At the start of the season the president was saying to me: "Middle of the table is fine this year." When we were doing well, he was like: "We must do better or we'll die." This is the mentality of football. When you're at lunch, the more you eat the more you want to taste something good. Today, Albanian people expect that we'll qualify from the group, maybe get to the Final.

What will be success for you in France?
Success is realising something unexpected – like what happened in qualifying. Doing it again would be difficult, to say the least!

These days people cheer your name on the streets of Tirana. What's that like?
Oh, that's just football. It's the same in Italy, the same in the US. When something unexpected happens, it gives a great enthusiasm and happiness. The problem is managing it, because if you set the target too high there is a huge problem for everyone because it's an illusion.

> "When something unexpected happens, it gives a great enthusiasm and happiness. The problem is managing it"

Is there a wider goal in terms of developing grass-roots football here?
We have a good base group of players that are doing well, and young players that are waiting on the fringes and progressing at their clubs. Our main problem is we have a terrible World Cup qualifying group, with Spain, Italy, Israel and Macedonia [and Liechtenstein], and only one guaranteed to go through. We have one stadium capable of staging international club matches. The level of the local league has not increased and there are not enough academies for young players. It's a poor country. A few people have lots of money, but most people have no money. It's not good.

It would have been unthinkable a few years ago that an Albanian player such as Rey Manaj, who is 19 and playing for Internazionale in Serie A, wouldn't be a regular for the national side. Isn't that progress?
Manaj particularly is very young and has rarely played in the Inter first team. For me he's a very good player, but his mind is not in the right place.

How does it feel to have coached in your homeland for so many years, only for Albania to become the biggest highlight of your career?
Well, I've done some important things in Italy too. It was pretty difficult to bring Torino from the third tier to Serie A, let me tell you! But that's just big in Italy. If you bring a team like Albania to the European Championship, the whole world pays attention – it's a phenomenon. It's an historic moment for Albanian football, for the Albanian people and for the politics here. If I put my candidacy for prime minister in tomorrow, I could win without advertising.

So what does a coach who has achieved such unlikely success do next?
I really don't know. That is very difficult for me to answer.

Interview by Sean Williams

Popular...Albania are in the Euro finals for the first time, thanks to Gianni Di Biasi

Switch...Shkelzen Gashi was called up by Albania for the first time in 2013

THE PLAYER: SHKELZEN GASHI

You played for Switzerland. How and why did you switch to Albania?
Well, I played for Switzerland's youth team up to the under-21s, and Ottmar Hitzfeld [then Swiss national coach] was keen for me to play for the seniors. Then Albania were also interested, so I had a big decision to make. I took two or three days to decide, but I opted to play for Albania.

Did your family influence your decision?
No, it was a pure footballing decision. I knew Albania had a good generation of players, they had a good chance of qualifying for a major tournament for the first time, and I wanted to be part of that.

You played in the game against Armenia that clinched qualification. What were the celebrations like?
They were amazing, it was crazy. There were thousands of people on the streets to welcome us home. I was getting messages from all around the world, from New York, Zurich. It was incredible. The game itself was very tense. In the dressing room beforehand, everyone was very serious, you could tell by the look on their faces. We scored two early goals but it wasn't until we got the third goal, late in the game, that we could relax.

Can you explain Albania's success, compared to previous campaigns?
There's a new generation of players who are not just playing in Albania, they're in Italy, in Germany, in Switzerland. They've got more experience than in the past. The coach has called up a lot of new players – he's tried loads of people – so we've got more options.

What is Albania's target in France?
It will be tough, but we're capable of springing a surprise. We're going there to enjoy the occasion, sure, as it's the first time Albania has ever appeared in a major tournament, but we also want to give a good account of ourselves.

Gianni De Biasi is a very tactical coach, with an emphasis on defence. How is it different to club football?
We are quite cautious. In international football, you don't want to make a mistake as every game can be crucial. With the club you might get the chance to correct a mistake from a previous game.

You are one of the most high-profile Albanians in world football. Do you see yourself as a pioneer, playing for Colorado Rapids in the USA?
Some people were surprised when I left Switzerland, but I wanted a new challenge and the league is on the up. The quality is good. Now I've got friends ringing up and asking if I could get them a deal in MLS!

Interview by Gavin Hamilton

THE PLAYER: CHRISTIAN FUCHS

You finished top of your qualifying group, eight points clear of Russia. That was some achievement...
When you look at the group, both Russia and Sweden were favourites ahead of us, given both their past history and more recent form in qualifying for the major tournaments, so it was a fantastic achievement. We came into the competition with good momentum though, from our World Cup qualifying campaign, and beating Russia both home and away proved crucial in the end. The away game, in particular, was important to our overall position; a defeat and they'd have got much closer to us in the group, but a win took us one step nearer qualification. Russia is never an easy place, for any team, so to beat them 1-0 was an excellent result – as was winning 4-1 in Sweden to secure our qualification. To win nine of our 10 games and draw the other was outstanding.

Skipper...Christian Fuchs (right) leads by example in a friendly against Turkey

What style of play does coach Marcel Koller adopt?
We are a side that like to press high up the pitch, with pace on the wings and in attack, but we are solid in defence and throughout the team. But I think it would be wrong to say that we are simply a counter-attacking side. We also have players who like to keep possession, so it's a good mix.

Your first game is against old foes Hungary. Is there still "needle" between the countries?
Yes, it's still there given the history that exists between the countries, and it's a game that stands out in the group. It's going to be something special walking out for that first game – and playing Hungary provides extra excitement for the fans. As players, we have to focus on the game though, not the occasion, and make sure we are fully prepared. We will be giving everything to win though, that's one thing that I can predict.

Is there extra pressure on you as captain of your country?
I don't see it as a pressure; I see it as an honour to captain my country – whether it's a friendly, a qualifier or in a big tournament. I have been playing for my country for 10 years now, and it's not always been a good path we have followed, but I feel very connected to the national team having had the armband since 2011.

Interview by Luke Nicoli

Austria

Strengths
The fighting spirit fostered by coach Marcel Koller. David Alaba as standard-bearer and midfield link man.

Weaknesses
Susceptible to individual lapses at the back. The technical limitations of veteran striker Marc Janko.

Wild Card
Attacking midfielder Alessandro Schopf was brought into the squad for the March friendlies.

Controversial Player
Playmaker and dead-ball expert Zlatko Junuzovic has been out of form for much of the season at Werder Bremen.

Special mention
Koller likes control. Every squad member signs a code of conduct.

Media expectation
Lots of positive noises that they can do what the 1978 World Cup team did and make the second stage.

Tournament objectives
The primary goal is to still be standing when 24 participants turn to 16.

Past Inspiration
The qualification campaign for the 1980 Euros, in which they finished a point short of group winners, Belgium.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
A 100 per cent record of failure against Croatia. Five encounters, five defeats.

THE COACH: MARCEL KOLLER

Are you expecting to fight for second place, behind Portugal but in front of Hungary and Iceland?
Of course that is always theoretical; in practice it is often different. Let's put it like this: it is better for us that we are in this group. There could have been more unpleasant groups, but our opponents will think the same: Iceland and Hungary probably see it in a similar fashion.

What would be success in France?
You can see small steps forward as success; for example, if we qualify for the knockout stage. Then it also depends on who your opponent will be. If you have a little bit of luck you can get through; if you're a bit unlucky you can get knocked out. You can give everything and still lose, that is the problem with football.

What have your preparations been like?
I've watched 62 games of our opponents and I am preparing as well as I can for everything. In a tournament you also need the rub of the green. There are many things that you cannot plan ahead for.

What does the current FIFA ranking of 11th mean for you?
When I started here, in November 2011, we were ranked 72nd. We take this as recognition of what we have achieved. The manner in which we played throughout the qualifiers shows that we have become much closer to the top teams in the world.

The last time Austria played in a major finals was in 2008. Will a lack of big-tournament experience be a problem?
The only difference during a tournament is that we play several games in a row, so the recuperation process is very important. But the football won't change and the stadiums are like hundreds of other stadiums throughout the world. The players don't have to play any differently than they normally play. We have to make sure we're in control of everything that goes on around us – for instance that the players eat good food and feel well.

Preparation...Marcel Koller has left nothing to chance ahead of the finals

> "Austria is a small country. We cannot afford to select this player one time and then another player two months later"

You are known for relying on players who do not play for their clubs on a regular basis...
We decided on players right from the start who can compete at a high footballing level. We have seen what most of these players can do, whether they have played for their clubs or not. For me, it is more important that the player in question has it in him to be able to play the way we play. In the meantime, I don't think he will have forgotten how to play football. Austria is a small country. We cannot afford to select this player one time and then another player two months later. It would be more difficult for the team to adapt.

What role does Bayern Munich's David Alaba play in your team?
In my opinion, he has everything. He is a team player, as a person he is probably more reserved. He never gives the other players the impression that he is alone on the pitch. But, of course, he is the player who sets the level, the one the others look up to and try to emulate. He usually plays at the back for Bayern, which is a shame for us because I think that he has great skills in going forward. He can score goals, he has a super shot, but he can also play that final, decisive pass. He is also very good in defence. Tactically he is very alert, he sees the spaces that he needs to fill. He is very important for us.

Marko Arnautovic is the player you have selected most often in your team. Did you notice him straight away when you first started in 2011?
Yes, of course, I said straight away: that lad has qualities, but back then he didn't quite manage to show his qualities on the pitch. I visited him at his former club, Werder Bremen, before we had our first training session and explained to him what my thoughts were. We have been working together for four and a half years now and Marko has really moved forward.

Interview by John Holmesdale

Belgium

Strengths
Unique generation of talent. Wealth of midfield ability.

Weaknesses
Dearth of natural full-backs. Too predictable at times in their attacking play. Loss of Vincent Kompany.

Wild Card
Speedy and enterprising goalgetter Michy Batshuayi has made huge progress since joining Marseille.

Controversial Player
Everton striker Romelu Lukaku is often accused of not translating Premier League goals to the national arena.

Special mention
In the event of going all the way in France, each player will bank a cool €704,000.

Media expectation
The press are quick to take aim when they think the team does not live up to its FIFA ranking.

Tournament objectives
Belgium coach, Marc Wilmots, says a semi-final berth would be "a great result".

Past Inspiration
The battling goalless draw with hosts Italy which sealed qualification for the Final of Euro 80.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
They have not beaten Germany in 62 years.

THE PLAYER: ROMELU LUKAKU

Euro 2016 is your second big tournament, after the World Cup. Will it be less of a step into the unknown?
Yes, of course. Finals are always good, but it won't be the same as two years ago. We've the experience we picked up in Brazil and the stress will be different. We're more confident. We know what we can bring to the table, we know our qualities.

You beat Italy 3-1 in November. What did you make of them?
They were very strong tactically. It wasn't an easy match for me. During the first 20 minutes, I thought we were dominated tactically. They are good. They get forward very quickly, they play at a high tempo. But for me, it was individual class which made the difference that day. At the back, Italy have the Juventus unit and their big advantage is that they know the coach, who was their club boss three years previously. You can see it in the way Italy play; they operate like Juventus. I watch a lot of matches on TV, including Serie A, and in that friendly came across a lot of those Juve players. For me, Italy are one of the tournament favourites.

Is it true that you watch recordings of your matches and analyse them, too?
I don't do it so much with the national team. I don't play every game and there are a lot of other matches between international dates. I pay much more attention to my development at Everton, where I play more often. I learn things on a daily basis. It's different with Belgium.

You'll face some of your club colleagues when you play Ireland. Have you spoken to one another about it?
A lot. They are happy to be going to France and warn me that they are going to make life difficult for us. I jokily reply that we won't be easy meat. It comes up a lot in the dressing room. Even though our focus is on the Premier League, it's not been great for Everton and that's the main topic of conversation. It seems to me that in Belgium, thoughts have turned more quickly to the Euros because the championship there is less high profile. We are impatient to get started, but for the moment are especially relaxed. Most of the players are with big clubs and are in the hunt for titles or Champions League places. We're in a business which keeps us occupied every day, yet also allows us to chill out. Soon we'll be meeting up and then we'll get down to serious work.

"When you think you are among the best, you have to prove it"

Familiar...Belgium begin in France against Italy, who they beat in November

In the third match of the finals you will come face to face with Sweden and Zlatan Ibrahimovic...
Zlatan is a good forward. In the play-offs, he qualified his team on his own. When you look at his statistics and his football, he improves year on year. Incredible.

Is Ibrahimovic a good example for you to follow as a striker?
Yes. Just like every forward who scores goals. The way he has progressed, the rhythm with which he has gone about it. He scored goals in Serie A, the most difficult league for an attacker. He was scoring 25 goals a season at the age of 28 or 29 and has been doing the same for PSG at 34. Hats off to him.

Are you happy with your performances for Everton this season?
I'm among the best. That's good. Personally I am happy. I did expect to produce a season of this calibre.

Why?
Because I've been a professional for six or seven years. When you think you are among the best, you have to prove it. And I'm starting to do that.

Do you ever think about winning the European Golden Shoe? Or is it too difficult in England?
No, no. But maybe it will be the next step. We'll see. It's an objective. You have to try to break every possible record. I also want to win titles with my team. As long as the two aims go together, I'll be satisfied.

Interview by Peter T'Kint/ESM

THE COACH: MARC WILMOTS

Mentality...Marc Wilmots worries that Belgium don't have a "winning culture"

The international press put Belgium among the Euro 2016 favourites. Does this label bother you?
My team is one of the five or six favourites. Not the favourite. You have to stay reasonable, realistic. There's Spain, Germany, France, Italy, plus a surprise or two. To be one of the five or six contenders is great in itself. If I'd made such a prediction three years ago, everybody would have thought me part-crazy.

What final result for the *Diables Rouges* would satisfy you?
After the World Cup I said that if we were to qualify for the Euros and make the semi-finals there, that would be an exceptional achievement. Making it to the last four would be something special. Obviously, you are always looking to go as far as possible.

Who is your main favourite?
For me, France and Spain stand above the rest. France because they are playing at home, have a great pool of 80 very good players, with three solid options for every position. Spain because they will want to put the record straight after their unsuccessful World Cup. The Spaniards were a dominant force for six years and will want to show that Brazil 2014 was a blip. They also have the advantage of being able to call on a lot of players from Real Madrid and Barcelona, who are guys used to winning titles. You don't have to teach Busquets and Iniesta what to do to win. It's the same sort of argument for the German side, who are for the most part driven by two clubs: Bayern and Dortmund. Belgians don't have this winning culture. I only have one or two players like that in my squad.

Is it a good thing to meet Italy in the first match?
It could be the best thing; it could also be the worst – for us and the Italians. Imagine one of us losing that match, while either Ireland or Sweden win their clash. In that instance, we'll already have our backs to the wall and will not be able to afford any more slip ups. The trickiest part will be to get out of this group. It's an awkward one.

Interview by Pierre Danvoye/ESM

THE PLAYER: IVAN RAKITIC

What is the feeling ahead of the Euros?
Desire, hope. The desire I have to do something great with Croatia is gigantic; the desire we all have. I'm Croatian; we're not so, so big, we're not a massive country, we maybe don't have the opportunities other countries have. But the hopes are huge from a country with just four million people. It's hard to reach a tournament, but when we get there we are very competitive, we really live it. The Balkan personality is like that. The desire for this Euros is huge. It's special. And when you see the squad list, there's no reason to put us behind anyone.

The midfield three is made up of Madrid and Barcelona players...
Not just the three of us who are at Barcelona or Madrid, but throughout. The other day I was talking to a team-mate about this. I started in the national team at 19 and we had lots of players from the Croatian league, players from [smaller] leagues dotted about round the place. Now you pick up our squad list and you ask, "what's the worst team represented here?" and you don't know. We have players at Inter, we have I don't know how many in England, teams playing at big clubs in big championships: Kiev, Shakhtar, Monaco. I don't know where to start.

Does bringing players into the squad from all over Europe make for a stronger spirit?
Yes, although it's different too. The English team they play in their own league so the idea is similar: Tottenham, Arsenal, Manchester United, whatever... the idea is similar. But I play for Barcelona, Modric at Madrid, [there are players at] Hamburg, Inter, Shakhtar – and every team plays differently. To bring all that together is hard. One team plays the ball more, another defends more, another works especially hard on dead balls, another one doesn't work on that at all, one plays on the counter, another pressures high. Yes, it's lovely to being us all together, from all over Europe, but that is not easy. Maybe countries like England, Italy, Spain, countries with really strong leagues, have it easier because they're all playing according to an idea that's similar anyway and is reinforced when they come together, rather than challenged.

Will there be time before the tournament to embed an idea?
We have to try that, yes. And we do have an idea that's more or less clear. We changed coach. Ante Cacic is experienced and has spent a long time in Croatian football and has a positive, open approach. Now we have to make the most of the time together to reinforce that idea.

Interview by Sid Lowe

Croatia

Strengths
Top drawer midfielders in Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic. The invulnerable spirit cultivated under coach Ante Cacic.

Weaknesses
Can become rattled at the back when put under pressure. The cupboard is bare in the left-back slot.

Wild Card
Mario Pasalic is an outstanding midfield all-rounder.

Controversial Player
Critics describe Domagoj Vida as a weak link, but he's a central defender asked to play full-back.

Special mention
After reaching the semi-finals of the 1998 World Cup in France, fans will be returning in their droves this summer.

Media expectation
The local media have not always seen eye to eye with Cacic, but there is plenty of talk of knockout-phase glory.

Tournament objectives
Bold as brass. The last eight, possibly the semis.

Past Inspiration
A 2-1 win in Italy, in a Euro 96 qualifier, was a big moment for newly independent Croatia.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
France. Winless in five against *Les Bleus*.

THE COACH: ANTE CACIC

No secrets...Ante Cacic expects his side to peak in time for the World Cup in Russia in two years' time

You didn't have an exceptional career as a player. Does that matter?
The fact that I did not play for a big club absolutely does not mean anything. Neither [Tomislav] Ivic, a coach whom I respect, nor [Jose] Mourinho, were particularly good players. On the other hand, you have a large number of respected players who, when it comes to coaching, just have no idea.

How easy is it to handle players such as Modric, Rakitic, Mandzukic, Corluka and others who play for big clubs and are world famous?
Easy. Big players are the easiest to handle because they are top professionals, accustomed to order and discipline. They know that the team matters more than everything, that nobody should jeopardise the homogeneity of the team. And if that happens, they all know, there is no excuse.

You dropped Dejan Lovren when he was warming up during the friendly against Hungary...
I respect each player, but Lovren's behaviour was not acceptable and there is no mercy. He was a safe passenger for Euro 2016, but he has ruled himself out.

What did you change when you took over from Niko Kovac?
I did not do anything special. I made some changes in our tactics, more accurately I allowed individual players to play their natural positions – for example, Rakitic closer to the attack, behind the two forwards. I also relaxed the visits from family members, because we are not in a monastery.

How do you feel about players who are not regulars with their clubs?
I will only consider those players who play for their clubs. The only exception is Matej Kovacic, whose qualities I know and whose training sessions at Real Madrid are often stronger and more demanding than some league matches.

> "Big players are the easiest to handle because they are top professionals, accustomed to order and discipline"

What is your assessment of your group?
Our group is challenging. Turkey, Czech Republic, and Spain in particular, all have strong teams. But, nevertheless, I believe that we can pass the first round, and then in the knockout stage everything depends on the opponent in front of us. You need to have the best morale and harmony. We have those ingredients. I can say that because our players are strong characters, but also because I am a coach who knows how to create the right ambience. I haven't got secret methods, but I respect football. Our generation should reach its maximum at the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

Some fans are boycotting the national team, in protest at the takeover by Zdravko Mamic [controversial owner of Dinamo Zagreb]...
Our national team is the pride of Croatia, no one has done so much to promote our country as footballers. And that's why a boycott, in my opinion, is an act of treason. Literally so. But I am convinced that in France we will have a great support as it has been at each of the big tournaments. I am sure we will be watched by tens of thousands of fans.

Interview by Zdravko Reic

Czech Republic

Strengths
Resilience. The tactical expertise of coach Pavel Vrba. Petr Cech in goal.

Weaknesses
A leaky defence, especially suspect through the middle. No out-and-out goalscorer.

Wild Card
Emerging Sparta Prague headliner Martin Frydek can be of use at left-back or in central midfield.

Controversial Player
Left-back David Limbersky crashed his Bentley while intoxicated and allegedly tried to flee the scene.

Special mention
Petr Cech on drums for the squad's Euro 2016 single *All for One*.

Media expectation
There is a lot of faith in Vrba, much less in his star-shorn squad.

Tournament objectives
Having beaten Holland twice in qualifying, the Czechs have their sights set on the quarter-finals.

Past Inspiration
Beating Italy, Portugal and France en route to winning silver at Euro 96.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Russia. Too many political distractions.

THE COACH: PAVEL VRBA

You went four games without a win before the qualifiers started – and then won your first four games. What changed?
Those early games were about getting to know each other. I explained to the players how I wanted them to play and I had to get to know their needs and abilities. With a national team you don't have enough time to set up everything as you do with a club side.

Group D is widely seen as one of Euro 2016's strongest. Do you share that view?
There are no easy groups or opponents, but we do have three very strong teams in our group. Any of them can qualify for the knockout stage.

Do you expect Spain to win the group?
I suppose Spain would like to prove they are as strong as they were three or four years ago. After the World Cup, they will have huge motivation to beat everyone.

And what would be a successful tournament for you?
We will be happy with every good result, every point, but we will be fighting to reach the knockout stage for sure. If you're in the tournament you have to fight for it.

What are your team's main strengths?
Our team's main strength is the team itself. We have no star players – other than Petr Cech – but we are capable of playing as a team, with good tactics, good set-pieces and teamwork. These are our strengths.

How would you describe your own footballing philosophy?
I follow the same philosophy I had as a club coach. I prefer an attacking style of play, always looking to score more goals than our opponent. However, you have to respect the strength of the opposition and sometimes you are not the one to dictate the game. You can't play an open box-to-box game against Spain.

How does being a national coach compare to being a club coach?
I am asked this question a lot: it's very different. With a club you are in a daily contact with the players and you can teach them everything in a matter of months. With the national team you only have a few days to set up things you decided on months earlier. Sometimes you have a four-month gap and that is too long for the players and too long for me.

> "I prefer an attacking style of play, always looking to score more goals than our opponent...but you can't play an open box-to-box game against Spain"

Philosophy...Pavel Vrba likes to play an attacking style of football

How important is Petr Cech?
He is a winner and this is something very important for the team. He is a professional and he can help us on the pitch and in the dressing room as well.

There are plenty of domestic league players in this Czech squad. Why is that, and is it a good thing?
From my point of view it's a very good thing. The players can learn a lot by playing against such difficult opponents and this can push them to a higher level. We like to have players from the Czech league and our participation at this tournament proves they are good enough. The Czech league is getting better and better thanks to these qualification games and European club matches.

How do you follow the progress of Czech players who play abroad?
I am very interested in their performances but the problem is they are struggling sometimes. Often they are not in their club's starting line-up and that is a problem for us. But it is getting better, with Darida, Gebre Selassie, Kaderabek, Sivok, Necid, etc.

What sort of help does former national boss Karel Bruckner give you?
He is very experienced and knows all about the opponent's players and our players, their strengths and weaknesses. He is a very good advisor.

Interview by Sam Beckwith

THE PLAYER: JIRI SKALAK

You finished top of a group that included Turkey and Holland, so are you confident ahead of the finals?
Yes, we feel we have good momentum going into the tournament. When we started our group we knew it would be tough, and to finish top says a lot about the quality and the determination we have in our squad. It was a big surprise for me to see Holland miss out from our group but we always felt confident we would qualify for the finals – although finishing top is something we are proud of.

You beat Holland in your first qualifying game. How important was that?
It was very important. We knew we needed to get off to a good start, especially in front of our own fans, and so to beat such a good team really gave us confidence heading into the rest of the competition. We beat Turkey away in our next game and we had already opened up a gap on our two main rivals and we had beaten them both. We also beat Holland in Amsterdam in our last game and that was a strange atmosphere. It was quite strange to see them miss out. You look at their players and it's hard to believe they're not going, but you can't deny Iceland, Turkey and ourselves deserve our places.

You face a tough group in the finals, with Spain, Croatia and, again, Turkey...
When you look at all the groups, it looks like ours is the most competitive of all. I don't think there will be much room for slip-ups and we face Spain first, who in my opinion are the best team in Europe at the moment – ahead of both England and France. We will be the underdogs in the game and know that if we lose that one we will probably have to win our other games. Everyone expects Spain to win so maybe that will work to our advantage.

Would you agree that the Spain game will be a clash of playing styles?
We know that Spain play a very technical style of football, whereas our game is more defensive. We are a team that works hard rather than rely on any one outstanding individual. We prefer to soak up the pressure then hit teams on the counter-attack. One of our strengths is our pace going forward and scoring goals.

Do you think it will all be about finishing second in the group?
We know a lot about Turkey; they are a good team who beat us towards the end of the qualifying campaign, but we had already booked our place in the finals so I don't think you can read much into that game. Croatia, too, have lots of outstanding technical players who always perform in the big tournaments. It is going to be very close.

Interview by Luke Nicoli

England

Strengths
A new wave of young lions. Confidence flowing from a perfect qualifying campaign.

Weaknesses
Soft underbelly in central defence. Lack of experience. Roy Hodgson's ultra-cautious nature.

Wild Card
Leicester City midfielder Danny Drinkwater. Cultured passing and tireless activity in one package.

Controversial Player
A widely held view is that skipper Wayne Rooney is past his best and has become a bed-blocker.

Special mention
With an average age of 25 years and 245 days, England boasted the third-youngest team in the qualifiers.

Media expectation
After all the hype of the so-called "Golden Generation", fans and pundits are setting the bar much lower.

Tournament objectives
Anything short of a quarter-final berth will constitute failure.

Past Inspiration
The 4-1 dismantling of Holland in Euro 96 was arguably England's best game for three or four decades.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Time-honoured bête noire, Germany.

THE COACH: ROY HODGSON

What are the realistic expectations for England at Euro 2016?
I will leave the judgement on expectations to others. I believe that every participating team will have high hopes and will share a realistic ambition of reaching the knockout stages of the competition. Anything can happen once that stage is reached. Football is a sport, not an exact science. So much can influence the result of a match, much of which will certainly be outside the control of a coach. Realism doesn't enter into the equation – and perhaps it should not. We want fans to dream, to hope and to believe.

A 100 per cent record in qualification is very rare. How proud are you of that achievement?
I'm very proud because consistency of performance is a goal for all coaches. I am perhaps even prouder of my total record with Switzerland, Finland and England – which now stretches to 50 games and only four defeats.

England appear to have a new generation of young talent. Is this the best group of players you have had as national team manager?
I don't like to compare too much between squads. I leave that to the journalists, pundits and fans. I am happy with the team's development over the past two years and I, like our supporters, am excited by the emergence of this younger group of players. The Euros will provide the stage for them to showcase the talent which we think they have.

How tough was squad selection?
We have learned a lot from the friendly matches. It was important to give some people a chance to show what they can do at the top level. I've had the chance to assess a lot of players before the very difficult decision about the 23. Sentiment and loyalty are two obstacles one must be constantly aware of. You've got to be careful with loyalty and you've got to be careful with sentiment. I hope I'm going to be aware of what people have done over two years: the collective weight of their performances and contribution. I also hope I'm not going to be tempted just to take someone to the Euros because he's done that – and then leave someone behind who is much more worthy. Of course, the situation with player availability can change rapidly. During the spring we had six players rehabilitating from injuries and the toughness of selection may well depend on their recovery situation.

> "Wayne [Rooney] has done an excellent job as captain...and it doesn't please me too much when it is suggested that the moment he is injured and doesn't play that he gets jettisoned"

Proud...Roy Hodgson's side qualified with a 100 per cent record

How important is the tournament experience of captain Wayne Rooney to a young England squad?
Wayne has done an excellent job as captain and leader during our qualification campaign and the many prestige friendlies that we have played these last two years. His international record speaks for itself with more than 50 goals, and we all appreciate and value his experience and contribution. He has also worked very hard at the other side of being an England captain: of needing to stand up, needing to lead from the front, needing to be the first one into a press conference if things haven't gone well and speak for the team. Wayne took us through a qualifying group in which we had a complete success with 10 wins out of 10 – and it doesn't please me too much when it is suggested that the moment he is injured and doesn't play that he gets jettisoned in some way. He doesn't deserve that.

Apart from your own country, who are the favourites to win Euro 2016?
Germany, Spain and France.

The tournament has a history of surprise winners like Denmark in 1992 and Greece in 2004. Who could be dark horses this time?
Of course, anyone can prove to be a dark horse. Belgium will be highly fancied, while Portugal and Austria could go all the way.

Interview by Jim Holden

THE PLAYER: HARRY KANE

Everyone is talking about Spurs' influence on the England team – yourself and Dele Alli in particular. Can you take your Tottenham form into France?
I hope so, that's the aim. It's up to the manager who he picks, but myself and Dele do have a great understanding. I think people have seen that this season. We have a great bunch of England lads at Spurs and we've had a good season together. We'd love to have the same impact with England.

Dele Alli's only just 20 but seems at home in international football. What makes him so special?
He's a great player, with amazing vision. As a striker, when you make runs, whether it's from crosses or forward runs, if you've got a player who can get on the half turn and play the ball forward quickly, that's perfect. He's a great lad, a great player and he scores goals too.

Wayne's words...Harry Kane has been given invaluable advice by his skipper

Has Wayne Rooney been a big influence on you and is he still important for England?
Of course, he is a fantastic player. He is our skipper, a great person to have around and Roy has made it clear he wants him involved. Playing with him and chatting to him is an inspiration. He was in a similar situation to me when he was younger, too, so he gave me advice when I got in the England squad. He just said: "Keep your mind focused, keep working hard, keep trying to improve, keep your friends and family close, and that's all that matters." It was great advice.

Who did you model yourself on as a kid? A lot of people say you are a modern Alan Shearer...
To be compared to someone like Alan Shearer is special. He's the all-time Premier League top goalscorer. If I score anywhere near as many as he did, it wouldn't be a bad career! But I also liked Teddy Sheringham.

Is it true you started your career at the same junior club as David Beckham?
It is! The club was called Ridgeway Rovers. We even went to the same school, the Chingford Foundation School.

Interview by Chris Hatherall

THE PLAYER: HUGO LLORIS

What do you expect from Euro 2016?
It's my fourth tournament; the first was the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, which was not such a good memory. Whether it is a World Cup or European Championship, it means a lot to play in these big tournaments. You play at the highest level, against the best players in the world, and you have a commitment and responsibility to play for your country. It is the best feeling you can have as a player. It is not easy to go straight from a long, hard season in the Premier League to prepare for a big tournament, but with the coach and the staff we have, we know we will be as ready as we can be.

Do you feel added pressure as captain?
You don't ask to be captain, it is up to the manager, but you have added responsibility. I try to play my normal game, not let the captaincy affect my performances and set a good example to the younger players. It is the same at Tottenham, where I try to help the younger players more. The balance in the team can be fragile, and it is important for me and the experienced players to be close and show a good example.

As hosts, France have not played a competitive game for two years. Will that help or hinder your chances?
We've had two years without competition, just a lot of friendlies, so we will be very hungry to start the competition. Looking at our team we can have a good competition; we will certainly give our best, and the support of our fans will help. We can feel the expectation from them. France is a big football nation and they expect to see us in the spotlight. If we have the right energy on the pitch, the fans will support us as a team and we can raise our levels.

How do you rate an England team that contains your Spurs team-mates Harry Kane and Dele Alli?
If we face England, it will not just be Harry and Dele, but Eric Dier and others as well. They are already big players for Tottenham and they are now playing for their national team. We train together every day, so I know Harry well and he knows all about me. His qualities are fantastic and I think he will be one of England's most important players for years to come. I feel confident for England's future, not just because of Harry and the Spurs players, but the other young and talented players they have.

Can France win Euro 2016?
I hope so. Football is about belief. If you go on the pitch without belief, you can't expect much. If you have talent along with spirit and belief, you can make great things happen. We have the belief we can win.

Interview by Gerry Cox

France

Strengths
Impressive mix of world-class young guns and wise old heads. Explosive attacking potential. Home advantage.

Weaknesses
Fragility at the back, especially at set-pieces. Lack of a front-line focal point without Karim Benzema.

Wild Card
Inconsistent playmaker and free-kick maestro Dimitri Payet has forced his critics to re-evaluate this season.

Controversial Player
After his role in the training session walk-out in South Africa, Patrice Evra remains damaged goods for many.

Special mention
Could Didier Deschamps be affected by accusations of financial irregularities at Marseille?

Media expectation
Upbeat noises wherever you look. Anything less than a semi-final berth and the backlash will be biblical.

Tournament objectives
As a player, second-best was no use to Deschamps and he hasn't changed a bit as boss. Win or bust.

Past Inspiration
The 3-2 victory over Portugal in a Euro 84 semi-final, when France came back with two late goals in extra-time.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Germany. Fifty-eight years have passed since they last beat their neighbours in a competitive game.

THE COACH: DIDIER DESCHAMPS

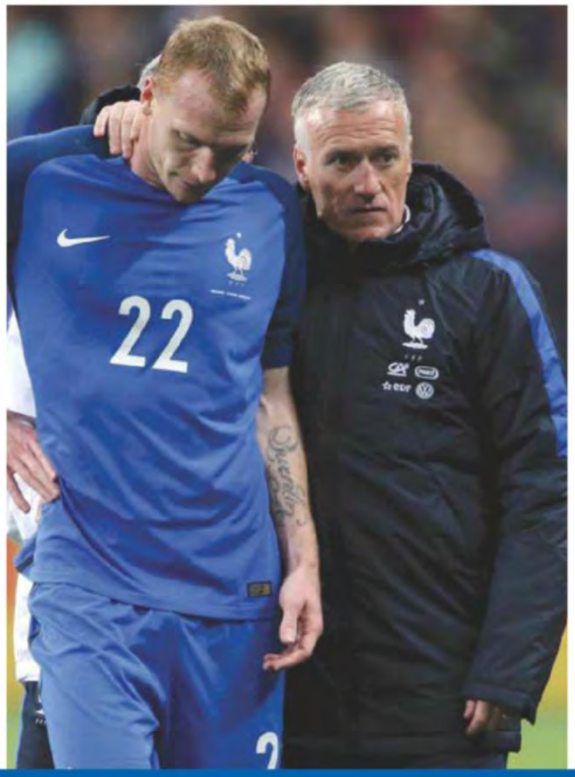
Are you pleased with the form France have shown in the build-up?
Well, every team progresses, mine included. The players are getting to know each other better and I've a lot of young players. You can't pick up experience from one day to the next – you need time. We're going into the tournament looking to win it, of course. But then there are lots of other teams with the same objective.

The whole Karim Benzema issue hasn't exactly helped, has it...
I met with the president of the federation, Noel Le Graet, and we discussed the situation. Form and performance level is an important part of the selection process, but it's not the only one for the French national team. A player's ability to work collaboratively within the group, to show exemplary behaviour and to contribute to the harmony of the group is also taken into consideration. All these factors meant we decided Karim couldn't take part in Euro 2016.

The decision will have pleased some and disappointed others...
That's how it is. I'm here to pick players and that's what I'll do. People can have a view on the hows and the whys, and they can choose to express those views or not. But at the end of the day there are only two people who decide: my president and me. It's not a problem. If I don't want to pick someone, then I don't pick them. It's all about choices and competition for places. There are around 40 players who were in the mix, but I can only choose 23.

Dimitri Payet is an interesting case. You had some issues with him in the past...
I'm only interested in the footballer. It's true that at one point I wasn't satisfied with certain things Dimitri did, but that was purely on the pitch. I heard he wasn't happy about that and I'm glad he wasn't happy. I've never wanted a player who's not been picked to have a big smile on his face. The fact that I brought him back for the friendlies in March shows that, for me, it's all about what happens on the pitch.

Comfort...Didier Deschamps consoles an injured Jeremy Mathieu in March



> "Form and performance level is an important part of the selection process, but it's not the only one for the French national team"

You've always been adamant that the collective well-being of the group is the most important thing...
The collective is the most important, for Dimitri as well as everyone else. There will always be players who'll be disappointed, even within a squad of 23. For every game at the Euros there will be 12 guys who are disappointed. But we're going into this tournament with a common objective. Good team spirit, with everyone pulling in the right direction, is essential.

You have got a good mix of youth and experience in the squad. Is getting that blend right vital for a tournament?
Age isn't a problem for me. You can have talent and quality at any age. And you can have a kid who's really mature at 18, and a 30-year-old who never will be. So if a 20-year-old is the right player to pick, then I'll pick him. You have to understand that it's much tougher at international level, though, so as an international coach you perhaps have to be more forgiving of a youngster's mistakes. But you balance that out with what they bring to the party; enthusiasm, a carefree attitude, power, speed. It's about balance too. You can't only have youngsters in a squad, in the same way that you can't only have older guys. I don't spend much time thinking about age. When I was a young player myself I couldn't stand hearing "you've got time". No, you haven't got time. You've got a short career..

How do you feel about your group?
Well, we need to start well against Romania, and then back that up with a performance against Albania before meeting Switzerland in our last group game. We respect all of our opponents, that's for sure. And at the end of the day, we'll find who's the best out on the pitch.

Interview by Howard Johnson

Germany

Strengths
The nose for goal of Thomas Muller. Silky creativity. Tournament knowhow. Immunity to pressure.

Weaknesses
Defensive carelessness and the "Bermuda triangle" that is both full-back positions.

Wild Card
Electrifying Schalke wide-man Leroy Sane. He is ideal super-sub material.

Controversial Player
Held back by injury, World Cup Final goalscorer, Mario Gotze has lost much national-team credibility of late.

Special mention
Triumph in Paris on July 10 will net each player in the squad €300,000.

Media expectation
Nothing less than a fourth European title will be acceptable.

Tournament objectives
Bundestrainer Joachim Low and his charges know the score. Only gold matters.

Past Inspiration
Oliver Bierhoff's "Golden Goal" in the Final of Euro 96 versus Czech Republic.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Bogey team Italy are the only side the Germans really fear.

THE COACH: JOACHIM LOW

Are you concerned about security issues at Euro 2016?
The theme has to be discussed. We live in dangerous times. It doesn't only concern football.

Do you think Euro 2016 could be played without fans?
That would be disastrous. No one wants that. I'm certain that everything possible will be done to ensure safety.

Are you still pleased with Germany's long-term development?
The "Summer Fairy Tale" [the 2006 World Cup] is still relevant. A World Cup in our own land was the spark. We've worked for years to change the German playing style. Since then we've made great progress.

How did you view the friendly defeat against England in March, in which you were 2-0 up but lost 3-2?
It's certainly frustrating when you lead two-nil and still lose the game. On the other side of the coin, you also have to say that it was not undeserved. We didn't always have the game under control. The way we played out from the back was not as good as usual. We had problems in our build-up play throughout the match. We created relatively few chances. It was not undeserved that the English won.

What conclusions did you manage to take from the game?
We know in which areas we still have to work. It was obvious that our combination play and movement didn't work out as I had hoped. In the second half especially, we were lacking in our organisation and compactness. We conceded an incredible amount of space. While we were in front, the game became more and more open. In normal circumstances, that shouldn't happen. We should have been looking to capitalise on a counter-attack or two, but couldn't manage it. With their very quick players, the English had more room to work with and were increasingly dangerous.

You experimented with Toni Kroos and Mesut Ozil as the two midfield holders against Italy. Could this be an option for the future?
Basically I wanted to try something new. We used a three-man back-line with three central defenders, so could afford to take more risks in midfield. Ozil and Kroos were outstanding both in defensive mode and constructively. We had a couple of problems in our build-up work against England. Those two are technically good, strong one-on-one and can play their way out of situations. It was one of those decisions when you go for it. It was a risk. That's obvious. But if not in this type of game, then when?

Interview by John Holmesdale

"We've worked for years to change the German playing style. Since then we've made great progress"

Sitting pretty...Joachim Low is reaping the benefits of a 2006 World Cup campaign that heralded a new dawn for German football

Dream...Mesut Ozil hopes to help Germany make history

THE PLAYER: MESUT OZIL

Do you feel you will be champions in France this summer?
We have a big, strong squad so it's normal that our dream will be to be crowned champions in France, that's true. But I still expect a really tough competition.

Germany have won the title three times, as have Spain. What would it be like to make history and win it again?
What can I say? If Germany win another Euros then it will be very important for the country and for our football history. It's a challenge and it's our aim, but I honestly think this tournament in France will be one of the most open in recent years. A lot of other teams believe they can win.

Who do you think will be your biggest rivals for the title?
It's hard to speak about favourites because, as I say, there are many. It's normal that France as hosts, Spain as holders, Italy and England...we know they will all be tough.

You see the English players week-in, week-out in the Premier League. What do you think of their chances?
England have improved a lot in the last two years. They now have young players of a high level and the team has momentum. I would say they are able to fight to get to the Final. For me, they should be one of the favourites for the title – and that's not just a diplomatic answer because I play in England!

What do you make of Germany's group?
For me, there's no such thing as an easy group in these Euros. Germany is always expected to win every game, no matter who we play, and that's extra pressure for the team. Poland, Ukraine and Northern Ireland will all arrive on the pitch against us with a great spirit and a big determination – not only because there are three points at stake but because of what it means to beat the Germans. We have to be ready for that.

Germany-Poland games always have a big atmosphere. Is it a special fixture?
It is. For Poland, we know that a match against us is always special and so it's never easy. You know exactly what the atmosphere will be like – and winning is going to be hard work. With Robert Lewandowski up front they have a real star, but he's by no means the only one to be aware of. They have a strong team.

Who do you think might be a surprise challenger for the title?
Belgium have a strong squad with a good chance of going a long way in the competition. I would be looking out for their performances, I think.

Interview by Chris Hatherall

Emotional...Bernd Storck celebrates with his players after play-off success

THE COACH: BERND STORCK

You took charge two-thirds of the way through qualifying. How did you approach the job?
Before July I was sporting director, then they made me coach. It was an entirely different job. I saw this as the perfect opportunity to take a new direction. When I stepped into this post I knew I had to change the style; not just the tactics but the coaching staff itself. I insisted that the Hungarian FA hire a full-time team to work around me.

Laszlo Kleinheisler hadn't played a single league game all season when you gave him his first cap in the play-off against Norway...
I knew him very well. I observed how hard he worked in training. I was convinced that he was ready. Then he scored our only goal in Norway. He repaid my faith many times over.

The night you qualified was one of the great occasions in Hungarian football history. How was it for you?
Before the game, the weight of expectation had been really heavy, given so many past disappointments. At the final whistle, at that very moment, I honestly can't recall what I was thinking. I do remember people jumping up and down around me, holding on to me, hugging me. That was the moment when it really hit me that we were going to France. That night we opened another door for Hungarian football. Maybe I also set some kind of example to my fellow coaches to believe in youth. We all went back onto the pitch afterwards and sang with the supporters. Everyone was very emotional. The atmosphere was incredible.

Style...Storck has made big changes

So how do you think these young players of yours will perform at the finals in France?
This summer these young Hungarian players can prove to the world just how good they are. They won't have a better opportunity.

How do you feel about your group?
We started work right after the draw was made. We play Austria first, so I started all my planning with them. I've seen their latest matches, and seen how precise and tactical their play is. I know that many people are curious about Portugal, and Cristiano Ronaldo, and how we will deal with them, but we play them last. Who knows? Maybe Portugal will have six points by then! Seriously, a team is not just one player, there are 10 others we have to play against.

A significant number of your squad play their club football in Hungary, which is by no means one of the strongest leagues in Europe...
The squad is divided about 50/50 between those who play in Hungary and those who play abroad. We showed against Norway that those in the domestic league can be relied upon to get a result, to work for each other. They proved their worth. And if the national team does well, that raises the overall level to what we want it to be for everybody.

Interview by Peterjon Cresswell

Hungary

Strengths
Comfortable soaking up pressure. Well drilled. Good crop of emerging talent.

Weaknesses
No outstanding candidate for the lone striker role. Only a smattering of elite-level experience.

Wild Card
Uncapped 21-year-old Mario Nemeth is an agile number 10 with a bright future.

Controversial Player
Nemanja Nikolic is a prolific scorer in the Polish league, but coach Bernd Storck usually confines him to the bench.

Special mention
Storck caused a stir when leaving out veteran defenders Leandro and Vilmos Vanczak.

Media expectation
For all the anticipation of a first major finals in three decades, the media have taken a low-key approach.

Tournament objectives
Storck talks about winning one game, "making life difficult" for their opponents and reaching the second round.

Past Inspiration
Reaching the finals of the 1972 European championships thanks to a 2-1 victory over Romania.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Without a win against England since 1962.

THE PLAYER: BALAZS DZSUDZSAK

You made your international debut at the age of 20 and you've been in the squad ever since. What has changed in those nine years?
On the one hand, everyone has reached a certain level of preparation that we have a fighting chance against anyone. Now we have the minimum that our supporters can justifiably expect from us. We can oppose anyone on the pitch with the same healthy confidence and determination. We approach each match in a positive frame of mind, believing that whoever our opponents are, there's something in it for us. Another important change is that training conditions have improved significantly. The training complex at Telki is constantly being added to. There's nothing else like it. I spoke about this with the team-mates at my club who play for other countries and it turned out that many national teams don't have anything like this kind of training centre. The quality of the pitches is as good as any in England, I think.

You were a member of Hungary sides that lost 6-1 and 8-1 to Holland. Do you think those days are now gone?
I wouldn't want to lose like that again, that's for sure! I really hope that we don't sink so far again. However strong the other team might be, you need to hold things together. I feel we have achieved that, that we're no longer where we were a few years ago.

A lot of your younger players aren't so well-known abroad. Can you see this new generation as the foundation for the national team in the long term?
I don't quite see a single young generation of roughly the same age, but we have a number of players who can play an important role for the national team in the long term. For example, I'm talking about Attila Fiola, Tamas Kadar, Adam Nagy and Laszlo Kleinheisler. Sadly, it's a fact that there's a big age gap in the national team and us older ones don't feel as if the younger ones are yet knocking at the door.

Elder statesman...Balazs Dzsudzsak has been an international for nine years

How do you assess your own career?
I don't think I can complain. When I started my career in my little town of Nyirlugos, I didn't even dare to think that I would last so long playing abroad – nine years – and be winning championships and Super Cups. Of course, there is the nagging feeling that I haven't played in a top league and was only involved in the Champions League for one season. All the same, I would like to carry on playing abroad for several years. I hope that my career has one or two more contracts in store. There still might be the chance of playing in the Champions League. I still consider that to be the top as far as football is concerned, and it would be good if more Hungarian players were involved at that level.

What are you expecting from the Euro finals this summer?
Every tournament has its routine favourites – such as Germany, England, Spain, France and Italy – but for all that, I would love us to be the surprise team! Of course, it's important that we stay realistic. We know which teams are powerful. From our point of view, the most important thing is that we do everything on the pitch for our supporters, that we fight for the honour of Hungarian football. If our fans can see us do that, then they'll stand with us.

Interview by Karoly Por/ESM

> "There's a big age gap in the national team and us older ones don't feel as if the younger ones are yet knocking at the door"

THE PLAYER: GYLFI SIGURDSSON

How do you rate your group draw?
It could have been a lot worse for us. Portugal have got some really good players, and they are very difficult to play against, but we've shown defensively that we're hard to beat. Hopefully we will get something out of that game. Austria are a strong team with a few really good players.

You beat Holland away in qualifying. Can you cope with Ronaldo and co?
We played Portugal away a few years ago so we've been up against most of their players. Everyone know their players, so it is going to be one of the biggest games we've ever faced.

Iceland's national team used to be preoccupied with attacking rather than defending, but in qualifying you only shipped six goals. What has happened?
We were really good. We kept a clean sheet in the first three games and only conceded in the fourth. When we had qualified, we conceded another two against Latvia. That was strange and out of character. And then we conceded in the last game against Turkey. We're a solid team defensively, which Heimir [Hallgrimsson] and Lars [Lagerback] deserve a lot of credit for. The defenders and goalkeeper Hannes Halldorsson have done a great job. Just look at his number of clean sheets, and the fact that we conceded three of our six goals when we had already qualified for France. To me that shows we've got defensive quality as well as a great goalkeeper, not only good forwards and midfielders.

What role did your coaches play in getting to France?
Lars Lagerback and Heimir Hallgrimsson have done a really good job. When Lars came in 2011, we were at an age where we needed the experience to lead us through. We needed to be more organised. We had good young players back then, and now we've collected valuable experience and can still score goals. Now we also have the defensive stability that we needed, something that has changed a great deal over the last four-five years.

A number of you going to France played in the Under-21 Euros in Denmark five years ago. Will that experience have an effect on the team going this summer?
It will obviously be a lot bigger this summer. Back in 2011 it was great to play at the Under-21 Euros, a fantastic experience. It has made a great difference that a majority of us in the national team have played together since we were 15. It has been going great lately, and I think you could see a few years back that this team had the ability to do something.

Interview by Troels Bager Thogersen/ESM

Experience...Gylfi Sigurdsson says many of the team have been together since they were 15

Iceland

Strengths
Discipline, focus and cohesion. Absolutely no complexes. Gylfi Sigurdsson's substantial influence.

Weaknesses
Limited tactical flexibility. Slow on the turn defensively.

Wild Card
Clever attacking midfielder Arnor Ingvi Traustason was frequently on the scoresheet in friendlies this year.

Controversial Player
Mainly on the bench for Cardiff City this term, captain Aron Gunnarsson is anything but match-sharp.

Special mention
Iceland have over 100 professionals playing abroad. Not bad for a country with a population of 330,000.

Media expectation
Optimism is de rigueur. Euro virgins or not, the belief is that they will qualify from the group.

Tournament objectives
This is not a team for half-measures. They visualise themselves in the second round at least.

Past Inspiration
A 2-1 win over East Germany in a 1976 European Championship qualifier was the country's first big scalp.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Sweden. Lars Lagerback will not want all the fuss of a clash with a team he used to coach.

THE COACH: LARS LAGERBACK

What was the secret behind qualification?
The players love to train. We focus a lot on our playing style and organisation. I did the same with Sweden, and the attitude towards working hard is outstanding in this group of players. The logistics around the team have improved, but the Icelandic FA doesn't have a lot of money compared to the other teams going to France. When we played away against Cyprus, we had a six-hour stopover in London and the players weren't remotely unhappy. We would never have gotten away with that with the Swedish national team.

Is there something in the Icelandic culture that's responsible...
I think it is a mix of upbringing and probably climate too. Icelandic people are used to fending for themselves, they fix problems and take responsibility. They are more individualistic than other countries in Scandinavia, but at the same time they are close to each other. I've met cabinet ministers. The president of Iceland showed up without a security detail, it wasn't necessary. No one gets aloof. When we play away, we can just go to the hotel restaurant and eat our lunch along with the other guests, everything is so laid back. Imagine that with Zlatan Ibrahimovic. It wouldn't be possible with all the commotion it would create.

You conceded nine goals less in qualifying for France than you did trying to get to the 2014 World Cup with many of the same players. What changed?
We've gotten much better at concentrating fully every single game. In my first year here, we always played poorly after a good game. It is a big challenge for a leader when the players think everything is going smoothly. Then you're actually a step closer to defeat in the next match. Also, the players are more experienced this time around. They've achieved more with their clubs, this so-called golden generation of players needed time. They are making better decisions on the pitch.

No fuss...the Icelandic squad are so laid back, according to Lars Lagerback

> "Icelandic people are used to fending for themselves, they fix problems and take responsibility"

Why is it that you seem so confident of making the knockout stage?
First and foremost because of our own ability and potential. If everyone is fit and on form, we've got a chance of taking points from Portugal, Austria and Hungary. Austria are almost as good as Portugal, they just don't have the superstar that Portugal obviously does. Austria have a good generation of players and a coach who organises the team well. It is not going to be easy against Hungary either, but we have the quality to take points.

How do you feel about facing a player like Cristiano Ronaldo at a finals?
With Sweden we kept Cristiano Ronaldo from scoring both home and away, and Arjen Robben played what was probably one his worst games ever, when we beat the Netherlands 2-0 in Reykjavik. It is not enough to have outstanding individual quality, a team needs more than that.

You always play with two attackers, even if you're facing a stronger team. Why not use a single striker and give the midfield an extra body?
I always believed playing with two attackers is the best solution, especially against stronger opponents. The attackers have to be able to and willing to work defensively, but you increase your chances of scoring if you have two attackers in the penalty area instead of one. We've shown we can score with two strikers against stronger teams. If your team isn't technically superior and can keep possession, a single striker is going to have a very hard time in my opinion.

Who will be your key player in France?
I don't like talking about key players, but anyone who has seen Iceland play knows that Gylfi Sigurdsson is a key player. For me, he is one of the world's best box-to-box midfielders. He is extremely disciplined in every aspect of his defensive role, and going forward his qualities are so obvious.

Interview by Troels Bager Thogersen/ESM

Italy

Strengths
Tactical acumen. Track record of coming good in big tournaments. Steel of the Juventus contingent.

Weaknesses
Serie A's fall from grace as a championship of reference. Sub-standard current crop of strikers.

Wild Card
In-form Lorenzo Insigne has taken a long time to convince *Azzurri* boss Antonio Conte.

Controversial Player
In the 4-1 friendly loss to Germany, central midfielder Thiago Motta was judged too slow and pedestrian.

Special mention
With Conte due to take over at Chelsea in July, the rumour mill is in overdrive about the succession.

Media expectation
Italy's showing at the last World Cup has led the media to consider the unthinkable: a *Nazionale* in decline.

Tournament objectives
Conte insists he does not have a precise goal in mind, though is likely to be eyeing the last four.

Past Inspiration
A 2-0 victory over Yugoslavia in the replayed Final of the 1968 competition.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Spain, who they succumbed to in each of the last two Euros.

THE COACH: ANTONIO CONTE

So then, how is Italian football?
There was a time when we dominated European football, when three out of four Champions League semi-finalists were Italian. But that was then. Now club owners tell me that, for the best players, Italy is no longer the final destination but rather just a passing moment on the way [to Spain or England]. Then there is a shortage of good young players. At the moment, it would be difficult to name good young players. And we're talking about Italy – a country which has always produced great talents.

How have the injuries to Marchisio and Verratti upset your plans?
The two weeks [of training camp] are fundamental because we are carrying out a whole series of physical and mental tests which will be crucial for my final selections. When I say that, I have a number of things to resolve. I am not talking just about injuries, like those to Verratti and Marchisio, I am also talking about mental well being. I am talking about guys like Pelle, Darmian and Eder who have been dropped by their clubs. I have got to pick them up. We've got to work on everything. I've got to do a reset on the minds of players who may be just a little down.

How do you see your group?
As far as I am concerned, this is the hardest first round group of all. We start with Belgium, the world's number one team. They have a very strong squad. They have players on their subs bench who would be automatic first choices in a lot of other national teams.

Are Sweden too dependent on one player, namely Zlatan Ibrahimovic?
Sweden are lucky to have a class player like him. He is a guy who, wherever he goes, wins a title. And over the years he has got better and become inspirational for his team-mates. Sweden are a solid team, very solid in defence, perhaps a bit less passionate than Ireland but still a very solid team, very tactically organised – and with a player who can make a difference.

And what do you expect from Ireland?
Ireland took points from Germany, they are a tough team. I saw their play-off games against Bosnia. They are a much improved team, they are obviously very physical and they like to use the long ball, looking for the lay-off. The Irish players are maybe not well known [in Italy] but there are some very useful ones.

Do you know your opposite number, Martin O'Neill?
He has obviously done a great job with Ireland because it is never easy to qualify for a tournament like this. Then they beat Bosnia in the play-offs, a team that has players of the quality of Pjanic, Dzeko and Luljic.

Is your forthcoming job, as manager of Chelsea, likely to prove a distraction before and during the tournament?
This is the final act in a journey which started out two years ago. Euro 2016 is the crowning moment of these last two years, so it is very important. Anybody who knows me, knows that I take things one at a time so I won't be thinking about Chelsea until mid-July at least.

Who are your favourites for Euro 2016?
Germany, Spain, France, England, Portugal and, above all, Belgium. But, mind you, even if Belgium are favourites, that doesn't mean that they will win, there is always room for a surprise. Look at Leicester this year, they were able to bridge the gap with hard work and commitment.

> "Anybody who knows me, knows I take things one at a time...I won't be thinking about Chelsea"

Focus...Antonio Conte leaves after the tournament but is only thinking of Italy

And they did it with a little Italian know-how from their coach Claudio Ranieri...
Absolutely, absolutely. For all of us it is a matter of great pride what he has accomplished. Italy should follow on from him. In a tournament like this, where, on paper at least, you will be playing against stronger teams, you have got to compensate with your intensity and your tactical organisation and make the most of those.

And how do you think Italy will perform at Euro 2016?
We'll start with our headlights turned off, because this is maybe not a good moment for Italian football but, as the tournament goes on, maybe we will light up and shine into other teams' faces.

Interview by Paddy Agnew

THE PLAYER: STEPHAN EL SHAARAWY

How important are the Euros for you?
I'm really looking forward to it because this will be my first prestigious tournament. I missed the Brazil World Cup because that came during a period when I had been out of football for more than a year with injuries. However, I am in good shape right now, mentally and physically.

Qualification was typically Italian, was it not? Unimpressive 1-0 wins against Malta, difficult draws with Croatia, but still seven wins and three draws...
There is no doubt that Croatia were the team which gave us most problems but they are a quality side. As for Malta, they were determined to limit the damages and it was not easy against them. However, I'm convinced our squad is solid, technically sound, united and very determined.

What do you make of Italy's group?
Ours is a difficult group. For a start we begin with one of the favourites, Belgium, a side with a very strong squad. When we played them in November [Italy lost 3-1] we held our own for an hour but then the physical differences between us made themselves felt.

Next up is Sweden. What do you make of them?
Sweden are a strong team...and up front they have that fellow!

Does Ibrahimovic dominate too much?
They have a team with a world-class player up front, but he is also a guy who knows us, knows Serie A well, and all that will help his team against us.

Finally, the Republic of Ireland. Do you know any of their team?
I don't know them well but if they have got this far, they have to be good. Maybe Ireland doesn't have the most famous players at Euro 2016 but we know that they are a side that will fight to the last. Look at Leicester City, they didn't have any famous names in their squad but they still managed to win the Premiership.

Who are your favourites for Euro 2016?
Germany are obviously a very strong team, so too are Belgium and the host nation, France. Then too, England look to me like a team that is improving. Mind you, we'll be a pretty serious team ourselves.

Is this a team formed in the image of coach Antonio Conte?
Yes. From the time he was winning Serie B with Siena, it was obvious he was a coach who made a difference, who knows how to handle his players and someone with a very strong character. And he showed all that in his three years at Juventus. He is a coach who makes himself felt.

Interview by Paddy Agnew

Northern Ireland

Strengths
A collective far greater than the sum of its parts. Their unshakeable belief.

Weaknesses
Lack of major tournament experience. Limited top-flight representation.

Wild Card
Ex-postman turned QPR striker Conor Washington is flavour of the month.

Controversial Player
Despite piling up seven goals in the qualifiers, striker Kyle Lafferty has played very little at club level.

Special mention
They were the first "Pot Five" nation to top a Euro qualifying group.

Media expectation
Going to their first major competition in 30 years has the Belfast media crackling with anticipation.

Tournament objectives
With cynics claiming Northern Ireland had a poor qualifying group, they will look to spring a surprise.

Past Inspiration
At Windsor Park in 1982, a goal from Ian Stewart gave the Greens a 1-0 win over West Germany in a qualifier.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
France. Not a single win in six attempts, including 4-0 defeats at both the 1958 and 1982 World Cups.

THE COACH: MICHAEL O'NEILL

It was an incredible achievement to qualify without any star players. How did you do it?
I felt we needed momentum. In the previous campaign, our performances were better than our results. We needed ways to turn the draws into wins and we needed a goalscorer as the margins in games are always fine. Kyle [Lafferty] stepped up and gave us the goals, particularly in the opening eight games of the campaign. He scored seven goals, all vitally important. The big thing we have is a collective. Wales are a small nation but they have Bale. We don't have that level of player, but what we do have is a strong collective. We've a good organisation and we're a team that a lot of teams don't relish playing. We have to use that as one of our strengths. That's a psychological thing that we have to continue to develop and grow.

Are you settled on a tactical gameplan?
We've played about with a four or a three at the back; two up front or one up; one behind. It's pretty much governed by player availability because I don't have two players of equal ability or standing for every position. Sometimes the actual changes in system are forced upon me.

How big a blow is Chris Brunt's injury?
It is a huge blow, he's one of our Premier League players, but my job is to find a solution to that problem. It's not the case that we have another Premier League left-back ready to step in.

Was the draw as tough as it gets?
I think it probably is, let's be honest, but when you're a "pot four" team... As well as Germany, Ukraine and Poland are strong teams. They have top players, particularly Lewandowski, while Ukraine have one or two really good individuals. But these are the games where we've consistently proven ourselves capable of getting results. When I look back at the previous campaign [2014 World Cup], our best performances came against Russia and Portugal. We'd some great performances in qualification but we're probably going to have to get to another level again to give us a chance to get out of the group.

Does the new format make a difference? You could go through with three draws or a single victory...
Totally, it's a good thing. People initially thought with 24 countries qualifying, the qualification will become a formality, the big countries will qualify easily. But it didn't prove to be that. We got our first chance of automatic qualification in the eighth game and we took it in the ninth, but in those two final games only four or five countries had qualified. Because more teams had hope for longer it gave the smaller nations hope. So many places went right to the wire.

"Eight teams go home after the group and my aim is not to be one of those teams"

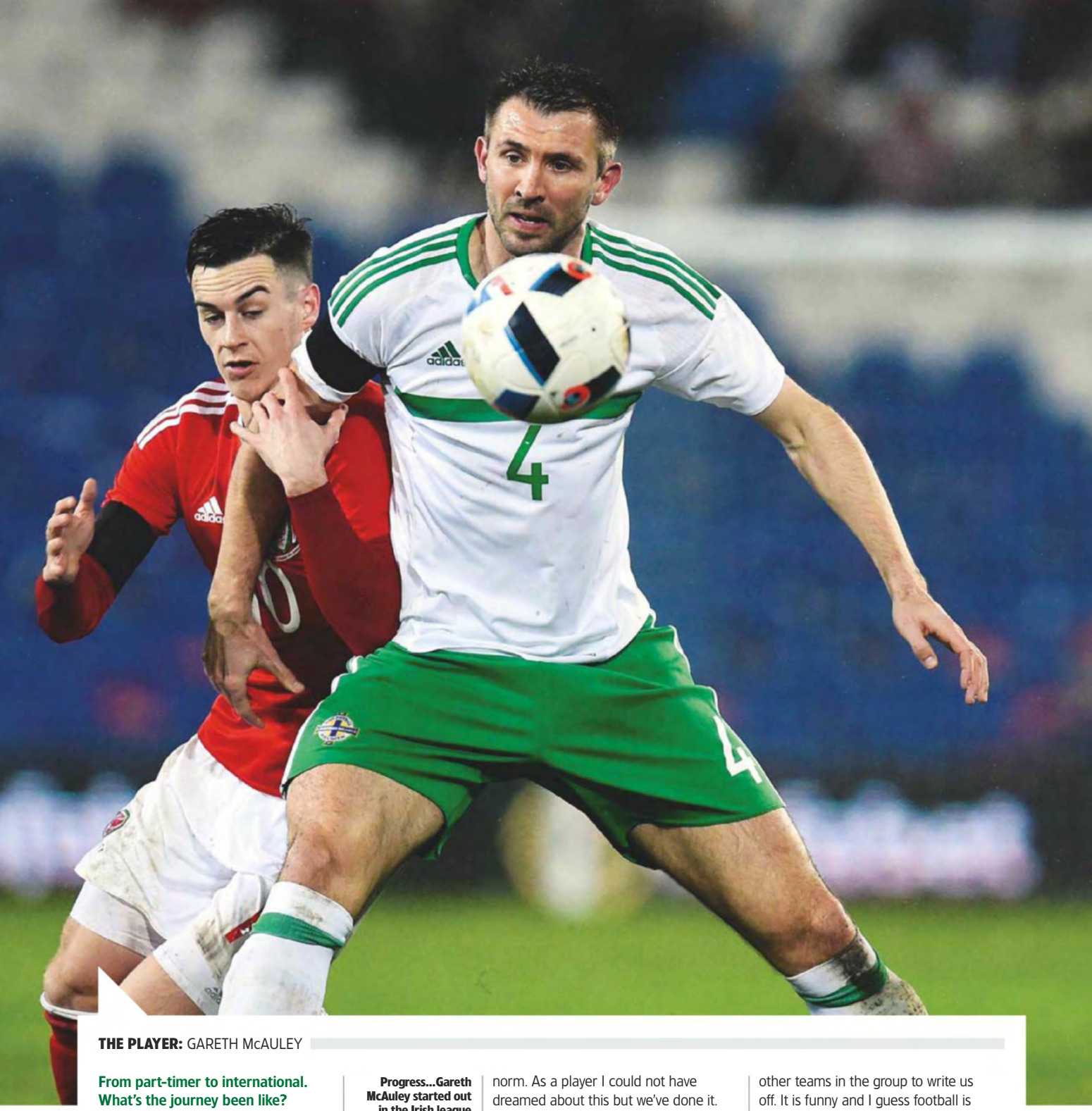
High flyer...Michael O'Neill celebrates with his players

So what is the target in France?
It would be an amazing achievement for us if we can reach the knockout stage but that's what we have to hope to do. Only eight teams go home after the group and my aim is not to be one of those teams. We have prepared with that goal. It won't be devastation if we don't because we've already had the high of going, but that's what we aspire to.

This will be a new experience for you and the fans...
For a whole generation this is their first tournament. If you're under 40 you can't have much recollection of 1986 [World Cup], you will have only been a tiny kid at that time. So it's such an exciting thing.

Do you see parallels with Leicester?
There's a lot. Greece were in our group and Claudio Ranieri was their coach. We beat them and he was sacked, so I can claim some responsibility! Seriously, he's such a gentleman and there are a lot of similarities to what we've done. We have players from Leagues One and Two that we have elevated onto the international stage. Leicester have done it with Vardy, they've found foreign players that weren't household names and brought them in for realistic fees. It's such a positive story. That's what we hope to do ourselves.

Interview by Gavin Hamilton



THE PLAYER: GARETH McAULEY

From part-timer to international. What's the journey been like?
I was 24 years old when I went to England. It is kind of ridiculous to think I'm now on the verge of playing at a major tournament. I was a keen Northern Ireland fan while I was playing in the Irish league with Crusaders and Coleraine, and though we all hoped we'd qualify for a tournament we never thought it would happen. All the lads were Northern Ireland fans but most of them were in England from an early age. I've been on the other side of the fence, so to speak, in stands cheering the lads on which makes this all the more special. It was a bit weird when I first got into the squad but it quickly became the norm. As a player I could not have dreamed about this but we've done it.

Progress...Gareth McAuley started out in the Irish league

How do you feel about the perception that you only qualified because the tournament was expanded?
I find it funny sometimes. People are writing things and saying things that just shows a lack of understanding of football. They don't understand how strong the teams we faced actually are. A lot of their players are used to Champions League football and we can only dream of that. Jonny Evans has done it before with Manchester United, but the closest we've come this season was Paddy McNair on the bench for United. So it is maybe disrespectful to Michael O'Neill, the Irish FA and the other teams in the group to write us off. It is funny and I guess football is all about opinions. But had it only been group winners going to France we would still be there!

What are you looking forward to most about Euro 2016?
I've been talking to big Jonas Olsson, who has been with Sweden, as well as James McClean, who went with the Republic of Ireland. Jonas was saying no one expected them to qualify the last time and there was no expectation on them. But that meant they didn't apply themselves as they would have liked and that is something we can learn from. We aren't there to make up the numbers.

Interview by Mark McIntosh

THE COACH: ADAM NAWALKA

How do you feel about your squad?
We have no problem in any position. Of course, we would like all of our players to be playing regularly in strong leagues, but at this moment in time that is impossible, so I have to be a bit flexible. We have a strong spine in the team.

What is your view of the draw?
I was satisfied after the draw. I had no special wishes and nothing against having Germany in the group again. We were perfectly prepared, tactically and mentally, when we played against them [in the qualifiers]. I believe it will be the same in Paris. Ukraine have a very solid team. A few players are from top clubs like Shakhtar and Sevilla. We watched their play-off match with Slovenia so we have knowledge of them, but we will analyse their style in detail to find their weak points and be prepared for their strengths. Generally, the schedule of our games is good so we should try to be perfectly prepared for the tournament.

How did you approach your friendly matches in March?
The team is stable and based on players who have proved themselves during Poland's past matches and who keep up good form in their clubs. It is the result of over three years hard work on the part of the players as well as the entire coaching staff. But selection in the national team is never over.

You must have been happy with the victories in March, against Serbia (1-0) and Finland (5-0)?
I recognise the results with optimism but without euphoria. I am happy that the players showed the same commitment from the first to the last minute. They played well as a team. The co-operation between each formation looks better and better. The team reorganised quickly after losing the ball and were able to recover it so we could immediately create scoring opportunities. The team has made a lot of progress over the last year. Mental, tactical and physical preparation are on a high level. Our actual form will be down to the choice of players for the final squad.

Interview by Dariusz Kurowski

Poland

Strengths
The world-class finishing of Robert Lewandowski. Well-drilled defence.

Weaknesses
A goalkeeping department never far from a short circuit. No outstanding candidate for the number 10 role.

Wild Card
Dynamic winger Pawel Wszolek scored a brace in a springtime friendly win against Finland.

Controversial Player
Former captain Jakub "Kuba" Blaszczykowski is past his best in the eyes of some, indispensable for others.

Special mention
No team scored more than Poland's 33 goals in the qualifiers.

Media expectation
The consistency in qualification has sparked optimism. Nawalka is widely thought to have the Midas touch.

Tournament objectives
In six matches in Euro finals, they have yet to taste victory. Breaking that duck has to be the immediate priority.

Past Inspiration
In 1975, Poland took apart Johan Cruyff's Holland, running out 4-1 winners in Chorzow.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Apart from the World Cup 74 eliminators, they have always played second fiddle to England.

THE PLAYER: AREK MILIK

You scored twice as many goals for club side Ajax this season compared to the previous campaign. Why was that?
Last season everything was new after my transfer from Bayer Leverkusen. A new club, a new coach, new team-mates and a new home. And I didn't play as many games as I did this season. And at that time Kolbeinn Sigthorsson was still around.

You have improved as a player since joining Ajax. How did that happen?
I'm indeed a better player now than I was in the summer of 2014. Every day I put a lot of effort in the training sessions. And the presence of Dennis Bergkamp, one of our trainers at Ajax, helps a lot. He's always around; even after training he still wants us to do some extra shooting. In those sessions, I practise a lot on my weaker right foot.

What's it like working with him?
Bergkamp was one of the best strikers in the world. It really helps working with legends like him. I can't explain precisely what he does with the Ajax strikers, but we all improved. It has to do with tiny little details, striker stuff details.

You will face Germany in the group stage of a major finals again...
It wasn't a surprise to us anymore. But, OK, we knew at the start that we would run across at least one of the big guns. As the world champions, the Germans are of course the toughest opponents you can imagine. But we proved during the qualification that, if everything goes our way, we can beat them.

In October you scored in a 2-0 win against Germany. How did that feel?
I can't explain what that goal did to me. It was the first-time ever that we beat the Germans. During the game, the goal was just a goal. But when I saw it back on television, weeks later, I had tears in my eyes. We made 40million Poles extremely happy. The party lasted two full days. At home in Tychy, my mom was the proudest person in the world.

Historic...Arek Milik scored the opening goal when Poland beat Germany

> "I had tears in my eyes [after beating Germany]. We made 40 million Poles extremely happy. The party lasted two full days"

You have a close relationship with national coach Adam Nawalka...
He was responsible for my breakthrough at Gornik Zabrze. He signed me at the age of 17 from Rozwoj Katowice. Within four weeks, he gave me my first-team debut. He gave me his trust and worked a lot with me. He does the same during the last three years at the national team.

What's his secret as a coach?
To start with, he is a respected Polish player. He played more than 200 games for Wisla Krakow. As a coach, he is a friendly and honest man who can be tough at the right moment. As long as you work your brains out, you have his respect. That's what players like in a manager.

You play alongside Robert Lewandowski in a 4-4-2 set-up for Poland. What is your role?
We change a lot. We can go deep, right, left or in the ball. But when we defend, we play 4-5-1. It really feels great playing alongside Robert. Together we had 19 goals and 8 assists, that tells the whole story I guess. For more than two years, we've been striking partners. And together, with the faith Mr Nawalka puts in the two of us, we operate as a dangerous couple. But don't misunderstand me: Robert is by far the best striker of the two of us. I have a lot to learn.

Do you think you will have a successful campaign at the finals this summer?
One thing is certain: we have to do better than four years ago, when we were last in the group stage, even when we played at home. I believe we can do much better, we have a good team with a lot of good and experienced players. It won't be easy, but I'll want to stay as long as possible in France. It would be a huge disappointment if we won't make it to the knockout stage.

Interview by Steven Kooijman/ESM

Portugal

Strengths
Cristiano Ronaldo. The surfeit of young talent in midfield. Old guard's ruthlessness.

Weaknesses
Little firepower beyond Ronaldo. Lack of pace in central defence.

Wild Card
Dynamic box-to-box titan Renato Sanches, who has just joined Bayern Munich.

Controversial Player
Eder has been a flop this season at Swansea City and is rarely on the scoresheet for the national team.

Special mention
Ronaldo needs just three more starts this summer to become the Euro's most featured player.

Media expectation
Portugal have never failed to reach the quarter-finals – should they fall short, the dogs will be let loose.

Tournament objectives
Selecao boss Fernando Santos insists they can go all the way.

Past Inspiration
Their first-ever qualification for a Euro finals, sealing a spot in 1984 with a 1-0 home win over the USSR.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
They have never beaten France in competitive action.

THE COACH: FERNANDO SANTOS

You've said several times that Portugal are not favourites but are candidates. Is this a strategic approach?
If you look back at my declarations before Euro 2012 and the 2014 World Cup, when I talked about the Portuguese team, I said the same thing. I say now that Portugal are not among the three or four favourites, but are always a candidate.

Some people say you're a lucky coach. Does that diminish your work?
No, because I've never won anything in the EuroMillions! For years people said I was an unlucky coach, now they say I'm a lucky one. What can I do? I'm vaccinated against this kind of talk.

You've brought in new players and not stuck with the "closed shop" policy of your predecessors when it comes to the national side...
It was a concept I brought into after learning through experience. When I became Greece coach I found the same thing: a closed group, in which only six or seven players changed. I thought that was a problem and one of the first things I did was to break this habit. If I did it for Greece, it makes even more sense to do it for Portugal.

Cristiano Ronaldo has said that he aggravated his knee injury at the 2014 World Cup and if he could go back in time he wouldn't have gone to the tournament. Are you worried something similar may happen at Euro 2016?
I know Cristiano Ronaldo is completely focused on winning the European Championship. Nothing makes me think otherwise.

Do you worry he may be injured again?
I don't know his fitness status. What I do know, from what he's always said in many interviews, is that the only silverware that's missing from his career is a trophy for winning something with the national team. That's what he's focused on.

"Ronaldo is a symbol of Portugal, in my opinion he's the best player in the world and I hope I can count on him"

Lucky man...Fernando Santos can count on Cristiano Ronaldo

Does the idea of being dependent on one player bother you?
I don't know what this dependency means. Does Cristiano play on his own? Any team is to some degree dependent on their best players. I want Cristiano Ronaldo at the top of his game. And I continue to believe in the *Selecao* in any circumstances.

Could Portugal make the knockout phase of the Euro without Ronaldo if they had to?
I believe so, yes, but it's not a question that's relevant at the moment. Ronaldo is a symbol of Portugal, in my opinion he's the best player in the world and I hope I can count on him. But he's one player and nothing more.

Interview by Fernando Urbano/ESM

THE PLAYER: WILLIAM CARVALHO

What do you make of your draw?
It was a kind draw, in theory, but in practice it means nothing and we are aware of that. It's going to be a tough group. When Portugal goes into these competitions it does so with the thought of winning and we have to have this ambition. But first of all we have to think about getting through the group phase. As a Portuguese, I also dream of winning the European Championship, and it's a dream we all share. But first we have to perform well in the group phase.

Were you surprised by the qualification of Iceland and Austria?
It's only a surprise for those who don't follow football closely because one thing is theory, the other is practice. These are teams that don't have a big reputation, but on the pitch they showed the football they can play.

Are you favourites to win the group?
We can accept we are favourites because we are Portugal. We have a strong team and we can accept the favouritism, but in practice this is something completely different and we'll have to be at our very best to put this favouritism into practice, taking it game by game. Our mind-set is that we have to play a great Euro. Coach Fernando Santos has also said we have the dream of winning the Euro, and that's what we're focused on.

Do you dream about leaving France as champions of Europe?
Yes, I dream about it. I believe it's possible because we have a team packed with great players, a very strong squad, and our captain is the best player in the world.

Does Cristiano Ronaldo play an important role as the leader of the squad and in making sure everybody has a winning attitude?
As Portugal's most experienced player he transmits this message to the rest of the squad to make sure they are at the top of their game.

Are you expecting good support from your fans in France?
The support of the emigrants will be important. While we're on this subject, I appeal to all the Portuguese who live in France, and not only them, to support the *Selecao*, because their support will make things much easier.

Are you concerned about the security situation this summer?
No. In spite of what happened in France, I think things are calmer at the moment and for sure in this Euro our team and all the others will have maximum security, so it's not something that I think about.

Interview by Pedro Soares/ESM

Republic of Ireland

Strengths
The tenacity and fortitude of all Martin O'Neill teams. Utter fearlessness.

Weaknesses
A paucity of high-end Premier League players. Rationed creativity. Losing keeper Rob Elliot to injury.

Wild Card
Bournemouth midfielder Eunan O'Kane, who has come on strong since rejection by Everton as a youth.

Controversial Player
Skilful playmaker Wes Hoolahan: either regarded as a luxury item or treated as the prodigal son.

Special mention
Keeper Shay Given and front-man Robbie Keane have almost 280 caps between them.

Media expectation
Daunting draw, but four points out of six against Germany in qualifying has whetted appetites.

Tournament objectives
To defy the odds and plot a path to the last 16.

Past Inspiration
Ray Houghton heading home the only goal of the game in the historic victory over England at Euro 88.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
France. Their last victory there was in 1937.

THE PLAYER: STEPHEN WARD

Ireland endured a disappointing Euro 2012. What is the target this time?
I think first and foremost we have a target of trying to get out of the group. With the new format, the way that it's set up now, you've obviously got a much better chance of getting out of the group. We'd like to go there, get out of the group and then see where that takes us really.

The team's prospects haven't been helped by the draw?
Listen, it's a tough group, but you're expecting to be in a tough group when you're at a major tournament and I feel that we're a good team, a match for anyone at out best. You take what you're given in these situations, whatever comes out of the hat, but we'd be confident enough that we can go and make an impression. I think we've proven that we can play against some of the best sides in the world and give a good account of ourselves.

Ireland got to Euro 2012 by being hard to beat; this time big wins over Germany and Bosnia were key. Have they restored the confidence that you can beat good sides when you need to?
I think there's always been that confidence. We always have that so-called "underdog" mentality, that we like to prove people wrong, to show them that we're better than people have given us credit for.

Is there any significance to the order of your group games?
The first game in any tournament is hugely important; you want to get off to a good start. It's fallen that we play Sweden. I think that we're probably quite similar to them in terms of squads and personnel. They've got Ibrahimovic; he's the standout one, but other than that, in terms of personnel, I don't think there's much in it. It's a big game for both sides and I think whichever side comes out on top, which will hopefully be us, I think will really fancy their chances of going through.

But Zlatan Ibrahimovic has the ability to make a difference?
I've never actually played against him. I didn't play in the games against Sweden before but obviously I've watched him and he's a fantastic talent. He's proven in every part of Europe that he's a success; he has scored goals and won titles. He is their real talisman and one that we'll have to keep quiet on the day but listen, we have confidence, no matter who we play against. I'm sure that they'll look at us and identify players that they'll have to worry about. They'll want to win, we will too. It'll be an interesting game but one that we hope will go well and set us up nicely for the rest of the group.

> "We believe that we can go and get a result against all three teams in the group"

Buzzing...Stephen Ward is hoping to make an impression in France

The Belgians were ranked number one but nobody actually seems to think that they were the best team in the world. How do you regard them?
Yeah, I think you've hit the nail on the head. But the individual talent that they've got to choose from is exceptional. You've got to respect them. They've come through a tough group with Wales and a couple of others. Wales gave them a decent game away and beat them at home but the Belgians still did enough to win the group. The bottom line, though, is that you have to go to these tournaments and not fear anyone. We need to go there believing that we can get a result in every game and that's exactly what we'll be doing. With this management and staff as well as the experience that we have in the squad, we believe that we can go and get a result against all three teams in the group.

Northern Ireland and Wales are going too; has that added to it all?
Yeah, obviously, Sam Vokes is at Burnley with me and I know a couple of the other Welsh lads. We've got a couple of the Northern Ireland lads with us too. Like me, they're buzzing about the tournament. They want to go there and make an impression. Everybody's in the same boat. They'll be the underdogs in their groups as well but they'll have the same mentality as us with regard to getting results.

Interview by Emmet Malone

THE COACH: MARTIN O'NEILL

What was your reaction to the draw?
At the time of the draw we had a 50/50 chance of getting a so-called lesser team, but when we got Italy I thought that it was just our luck. They are most definitely a "Pot 1" team so it was a surprise that they were in "Pot 2" and it was disappointing that we ended up with such a tough opponent. But the same can be said about Belgium and Sweden. You curse your luck when it happens but then move on, plan ahead and try to get out of the group.

How do you rate your opponents?
Italy have a terrific track record in international football, particularly in World Cup competitions. They are obviously a very strong team. Belgium are individually very strong, and even though they have lost their captain Vincent Kompany to injury, they have top-class Premier League defenders to step in. Then they have individual players like Eden Hazard and some of the best forwards in Europe, so they will be very tough. And Sweden are always a difficult team to play against. They have their talisman in Zlatan Ibrahimovic who is a great player and they have a history of doing well when not expected to.

Luck of the Irish... Martin O'Neill has been handed a tough draw

With four of the third-place teams qualifying for the knockout stage, do you think teams will be more cautious or more adventurous?
Judging by the last World Cup – where I was over in Brazil covering a few games – it actually started quite brightly and teams then became cautious as the tournament went on. I'm not sure if that is a trend or not, and we won't know the answer until the tournament kicks off.

Do your performances in qualifying games give you hope for France?
I would like to believe that. Our games in qualifying were spread out over a long period of time and we had to get ourselves back into it after the Scotland game. But the win over Germany in the Aviva Stadium gave us great confidence to kick on in the group and we extended it to the play-offs, where we were able to overcome Bosnia-Herzegovina.

What would be a successful tournament for you?
That is the big imponderable. We managed to get out of a group containing the world champions, so it's up to us now to go and make an impression at the tournament. The team qualified for the last European Championships in 2012 but it was disappointing how that went for them. We want to overcome that.

Interview by Sean Creedon

THE COACH: ANGHEL IORDANESCU

You returned to the post of national coach two years ago during a tough period. Did you ever expect to make it to such a major finals while in charge?
That wasn't on my agenda. I thought I had done my job for the national team. I wasn't thinking about coming back, but I understood the special circumstances and I agreed to take over. I took over the national team during qualification in 1993 as well and it was a success.

Is it good or bad for Romania to play the first game against hosts France?
To be honest, I would have preferred we didn't start the tournament this way. And, of course, I wouldn't have wanted to play France. All this being said, I must admit it's a big event for Romanian football. This game will be watched by the entire planet. It will be a first for us and the chances for Romania to play the inaugural game in another tournament are low.

What do you prefer: playing a team that offers space, like France, or having to dictate the game to get a result?
We played a friendly against Spain this spring and drew 0-0. They are a similar opponent to France in that they love having the ball. We played well, both in attack and defence. My boys did exactly what I asked them to and stuck to the tactics we agreed before the game. I have to say I'm not sure Albania will play a waiting game against us. It will be the final game in the group, all the teams will still have chances to qualify. Albania is not a small team, they made an important progress lately. They are strong and have players in Serie A, Ligue 1 and Eredivisie.

What are your team's strengths?
We are tactically disciplined. We rely on the strength of our group and the desire to do something important.

Romania conceded only two goals in the qualifiers...
We don't concede easily and that makes me happy. This shows we are very well organised. It's also good we haven't lost for a long time. These results make us strong and give us the chance to progress. Of course, I would have wanted us to win all the games, I believe every manager wants that. Sometimes, though, you don't have any reason to take risks.

Do you expect a good support?
I want the Romanian fans to get behind the team, to encourage them because they need that. I understand all the tickets in the Romanian fans' sections have been sold for all three group games. That makes me happy, it's a big motivation for us. We want to make the Romanian fans happy.

Interview by Emanuel Rosu

Romania

Strengths
Defensive impermeability. The experience of veteran coach Anghel Iordanescu.

Weaknesses
Pedestrian going forward. Lack of firepower. Over-reliance on the old guard.

Wild Card
Steaua playmaker Nicolae Stanciu marked his debut this spring with the winner in a friendly against Lithuania.

Controversial Player
Iordanescu has faith in Bogdan Stancu, but critics point to just four goals in five-and-a-half years of competitive play.

Special mention
Romania's coach is so superstitious that the team's bus driver isn't allowed to reverse into a parking spot.

Media expectation
The "let's enjoy our first big finals in eight years" brigade versus the "Iordanescu is a miracle worker" believers.

Tournament objectives
A ticket for the second round.

Past Inspiration
The gutsy 3-2 win over England in the group stage of Euro 2000, prevailing thanks to a last-minute spot-kick.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Sweden. Memories are raw of their shoot-out loss to the Scandinavians in the quarter-finals of USA 94.

THE PLAYER: GABRIEL TORJE

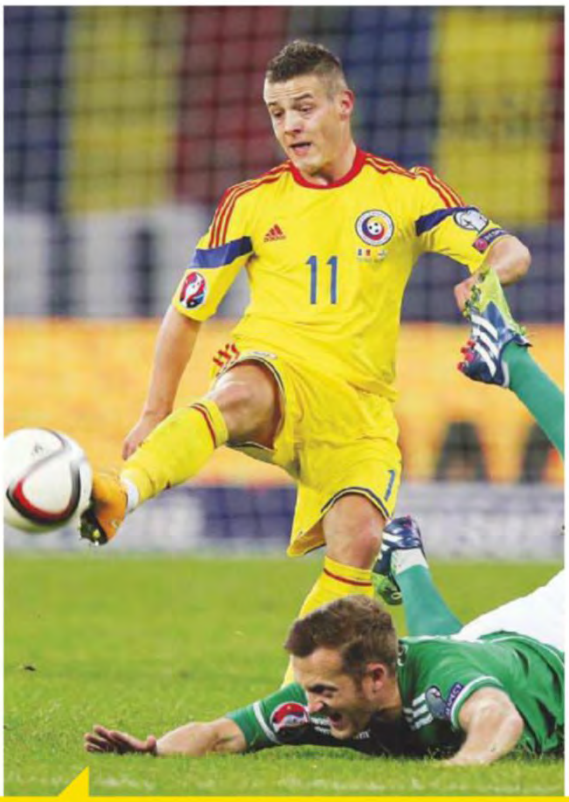
It's your first big tournament. Does life get any better than this?
It's a dream come true. Of course, I now want more. It will be difficult for Romania, but we'll run like crazy, we'll work more and more, we'll do everything to make sure Romania look good in France. It's not a cliche, but we've prepared for this since we were born. We are ready to fight for our country.

How big is this for Romanian football?
Unfortunately, it's very big. I say this because Romania shouldn't even consider not qualifying for every tournament. We shouldn't have empty stands in the Romanian league. We shouldn't stop producing amazing talents. We have football in our blood. Just watch how many kids still play football, how many fathers are happy when there's a derby in the league. We must not lose this!

Are you nervous ahead of the opening game with France?
I'm always nervous. I can get nervous even when I train and see a Romanian flag flying around. At Euro 2016 we will be playing for the biggest player we've seen in our careers. I'm talking about our 12th man, the Romanian fans. They need a national team to be proud of.

What are Romania's chances of springing a surprise in France?
We are working, we are believing and we are dreaming. I can assure you of that. From a scale from 1 to 10, we're a perfect 12. That's because we have our fans with us. I haven't felt for a while that we're so united.

What do you think the opening game will be like?
Against France, it will be crazy. All the planet's eyes will be on this game. Can you imagine an entire planet doing the same thing on June 10? The entire planet will be watching us. I can't wait, these are the games we live for. Do we attack or do we defend? I don't know. We work, we believe and we dream, that's our tactical plan.



"To quote Cruyff, 'I've never seen a bag of money score goals'"

Do you regard Euro 2016 as a stepping stone in your career?
I am proud and I thank God for what I've done in my career so far. I hope to stay healthy. As Cruyff used to say, "quality is useless without results. Results without quality are boring". I hope to stay healthy and not become boring!

Is France an impossible opponent to play on their home ground for the opening game of the tournament?
I'll quote Cruyff once more. I loved this man. "I've never seen a bag of money score goals." We'll work like crazy, we'll fight like it's the last game of our lives. I don't know how the scoreboard will look in the end. It's vital that Romania plays well, with its head high, and works for 90 minutes.

Who can be a star discovery in the current national team?
Me! You can imagine I'd love it to be me! But I'm joking! Any of the players we have can come up with something big. Romania has to produce a good impression, not only a player or two!

Can we expect an attacking surprise from this Romanian team or will the focus be on good defensive organisation?
There's only one ball on the pitch, so you must fight to have it in your possession. And, of course, you have to get it in the opposition's goal. We'll make all efforts so that happens.

What do you have that others don't?
A long absence from final tournaments. We missed it a lot. We are very, very motivated. And the fans love us. We missed them as well, I'm so glad we are going to France together. I can't wait to see my Romanians in the stands at the Stade de France. What if we're not as many as they are? I know how my Romanians sound when they're screaming together.

Interview by Emanuel Rosu

THE COACH: LEONID SLUTSKY

Tough job...Leonid Slutsky is coach of Russia and CSKA

England won all 10 qualifiers. Does that make them group favourites?
England are much stronger than the other teams. They have already raised a new, gifted generation. These players are young, but high level. Ten victories in qualification is a proof of their strength. Of course, in our group each team can play and progress.

You are managing Russia and club side CSKA Moscow. Is that difficult?
No, it's not a problem. There are many CSKA players in Russia's national team. Moreover, in June, club competitions will be over and I can concentrate just on Euro 2016. I see more advantages than disadvantages. As CSKA coach I watch all the Russian Premier League games. That's why I know the condition of all the national team players. Of course, it is a temporary arrangement and nobody knows what will happen next. Being coach is a hard occupation. If you lose a few games, you get kicked out of CSKA. If you fail at the Euros, you get kicked out of the national team. Then you have to choose between Rotor Volgograd and Olympia Volgograd, not between the national team and CSKA.

What are your thoughts on the naturalisation of players?
It's a positive moment. It is impossible to be cut off from the world and from globalisation. Germany, one of the most successful football countries, have played a full-blooded Brazilian, Cacau. Why do we have to be the other way? Our goalkeeper Guilherme received a Russian passport on absolutely legal grounds. He learns the language, pays taxes. Why should he have less chance of getting into the team than others? We can say that we have our own way, but I believe that if a player fairly and lawfully acquired citizenship, he is a candidate for the national team.

What about Roman Neustadter of Schalke, who will obtain Russian citizenship soon?
If the legal obstacles can be successfully overcome, Neustadter could receive a call-up. I think the probability of his call-up is very high.

Interview by Sport Express/ESM

Russia

Strengths
More energised since Leonid Slutsky replaced Fabio Capello. Athleticism. Defensive cohesion.

Weaknesses
The surfeit of players over 30. Little new blood. Few players based outside Russia. No depth to the squad.

Wild Card
CSKA Moscow's teenage attacking midfielder Aleksandr Golovin is a technically gifted dead-ball master.

Controversial Player
Playmaker and skipper Roman Shirokov is a difficult character who could start an argument in an empty room.

Special mention
Picking Brazilian-born keeper Guilherme has not gone down well with nationalists.

Media expectation
Not especially high after producing next to nothing at Euro 2012 and World Cup 2014.

Tournament objectives
Building for the home World Cup in 2018 is the real name of the game. Making the last 16 would be good enough.

Past Inspiration
Victory over Yugoslavia in the Final of the first competition, in 1960. Russia's keeper was the iconic Lev Yashin.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Spain, who have never lost to the Russians in the post-Soviet era, twice beating them at Euro 2008.

THE PLAYER: ARTEM DZYUBA

In both the 2012 Euros and the 2014 World Cup, Russia were eliminated at the group stage. Can you reach the knockout phase this time?
I hope yes. It's impossible to play worse. I think that we can qualify from the group.

How do you feel about the opponents in your group?
All the teams are strong. At first glance, England are the favourite. But, in fact, we have an even group, everyone can beat everyone. For us it is not the worst option. It's good that our first game will be against England as we can immediately plunge into the wonderful atmosphere of the tournament, in euphoria. And, of course, we need to start with a win to be more self-confident. But at the moment, the most important thing for us is to avoid injuries and all sorts of other problems. Frankly speaking, I am looking forward to this tournament. Even when I was watching the draw on TV, my adrenaline kicked in.

Who is England's most dangerous player?
Joe Hart – he is one of my favourite goalkeepers. It's worth a lot to score against him.

> "I am looking forward to this tournament. Even when I was watching the draw on TV, my adrenaline kicked in"

Who is the leader of England's team?
Still Wayne Rooney. I really like Theo Walcott . He's very dangerous, but now he has suffered too many injuries.

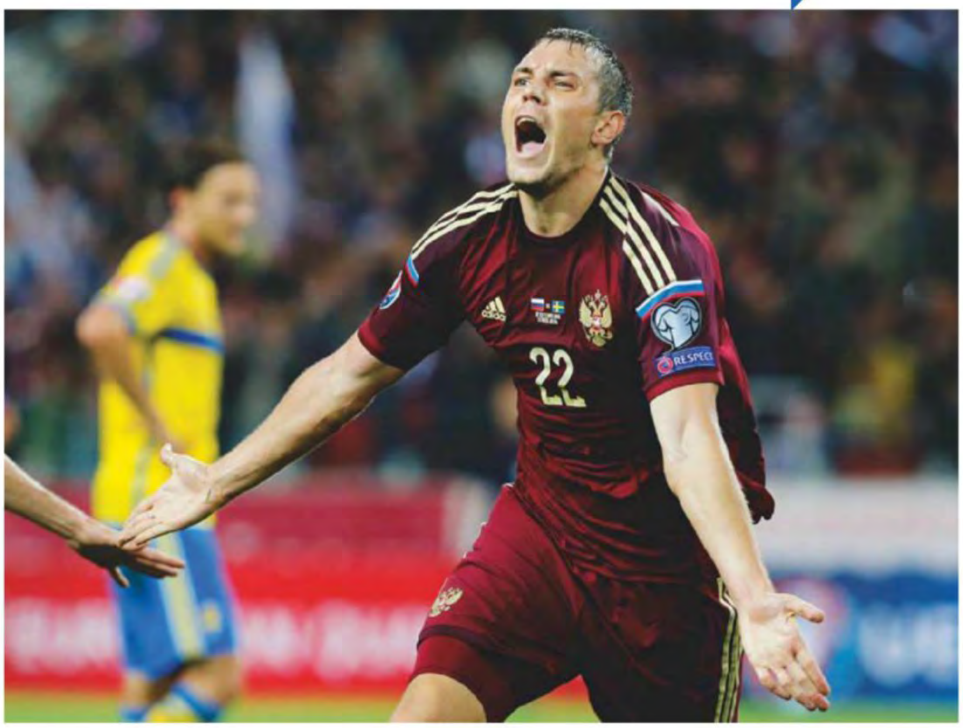
Wales with and without Gareth Bale: two different teams?
Certainly. Of course, they have Ramsey, but Bale is their main force. He is perfect. I don't want to offend Ryan Giggs, but this team is probably the strongest in Wales' history. And I think they want to show the English they are better.

What do you know about Slovakia?
They are dark horses – nobody expects anything from them, but Slovakia can surprise everyone. I think, we are dark horses, too. But, for us, elimination in the group stage will be a big flop.

What are Russia's objectives?
First we need to reach the knockout stage, then we will set other goals. We need to soberly assess our situation. Only France and Germany can set the ambitious goals like reaching the semi-finals. The rest will set the tasks step by step.

In what way has Leonid Slutsky changed the team?
He changed the atmosphere. Slutsky creates the positive energy – he is not only a winner, but a very decent person. And all this is reinforced by the fact that he is a professional and powerful coach. Slutsky was the best candidate for the team. He showed that everything is OK, that we can win. Slutsky has won me over. He is the number one!

Interview by Sport Express/ESM



Positive energy...Artem Dzyuba says he has been won over by Russia's coach, who he describes as "professional and powerful"

Slovakia

Strengths
Team spirit. The defensive partnership of Martin Skrtel and Jan Durica. The runs from deep of Marek Hamsik.

Weaknesses
Not enough fluidity in midfield. Insufficient quality on the bench.

Wild Card
Attacking midfielder Ondrej Duda, whose enthusiasm and freshness make him an ideal impact sub.

Controversial Player
Michal Duris is slammed for his poor goal return and for never scoring in a competitive international.

Special mention
Coach Jan Kozak was an unused substitute when Czechoslovakia lost 2-0 to England at the 1982 World Cup.

Media expectation
Confidence is high that they can repeat their World Cup 2010 exploits and reach the last 16.

Tournament objectives
Second round minimum. Jan Kozak hates the underdog tag and says they'll raise their game against the big boys.

Past Inspiration
Slovaks formed the majority of the Czech team that beat West Germany on penalties in the 1976 Final.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Any side who sits back and hands them the initiative.

THE COACH: JAN KOZAK

What was your first reaction when you heard the draw?
First of all, all 24 teams who are taking part in the Euro 2016 finals have got there on merit. They've all been good enough to qualify. Therefore there are no weak teams in France. England is a big football country, with a huge tradition and very strong league. They won all 10 qualifying matches so that shows their quality. They must be considered as favourites in the group. As for Russia, it was good that we played them in 2014 when they were warming up for the World Cup. But that was Russia under Fabio Capello. Since Leonid Slutsky took over they have become a different proposition altogether, with real possibilities in France. Wales are a strong side who always play with a lot of heart and great team spirit. Their key players – Gareth Bale at Real Madrid, Aaron Ramsey at Arsenal – play for top clubs. We won't take them lightly.

How would you compare the squad that beat the world champions, Italy, at the 2010 World Cup and the one in France?
About half-a-dozen players who starred for us in South Africa will be in France. They all gained great experience and now they've got six more years of top-level football under their belts. They're better players. Therefore, along with the younger players who have come through, I would say that we're at a higher level now. We proved that in qualifying.

How problematic is it that nearly all of your squad play abroad?
Yes, most of our players are abroad but they play for very good teams in very good leagues: Hamsik at Napoli, Kucka at Milan, Skrtel at Liverpool, and so on. This means that week in, week out, they play against good opposition. This can only be good for the national side. Yes, we have to work out the logistic of getting everyone together for short periods of time, but every national team has to do that.

Early on in your time as coach, you opted for Matus Kozacik as goalkeeper even though he hadn't played an international in years...
The position of goalkeeper is the most important and most specific in any team. I knew I had to make the right choice so I went with my gut. I'd seen Kozacik do well with Viktoria Plzen in the Champions League. I knew he would do everything to keep his place as the number one over the established choice, Jan Mucha. He had the motivation to go out and prove himself.

> "We will have to go out and prove ourselves. We're not inferior to any team in France"

Vital...Jan Kozak says a solid back four is fundamental to Slovakia's chances

How important is an established back four to your side?
Our solid back four is absolutely fundamental. These defenders don't play for the same club, week after week, so the fact Skrtel and Durica have been together in a Slovak shirt for a decade is crucial. They can anticipate each other's moves – when one steps forward, the other steps back, and so on.

Do you feel that Slovakia lack the fast, young players England have?
Yes, we should recognise that England have a strong team, that Roy Hodgson has brought these players through. Since the draw we have been on regular spying missions to England. We've been watching their players closely, anticipating how they will play. Yes, they've proved themselves in a top league but a major finals is a different matter.

How do you stop Bale?
I'm a big fan of Real Madrid so I've seen a lot of Bale these last three years. But Wales aren't Bale alone. We proved against Spain we can defend against the best in the world. We respect Bale, of course we do, but the most important thing is that we have the team spirit to overcome Wales.

What would success be at Euro 2016?
This will be our first Euro finals as an independent nation. We will have to go out and prove ourselves. We're not inferior to any team in France. For us, getting through the group stage would be a success. We were very strong in qualifying. Now we have to show what we can do in France.

Interview by Peterjon Cresswell

THE PLAYER: ADAM NEMEC

What was your first impression of your group when you saw the draw?
I didn't see it live because I had a match with Willem II. It is not the most difficult group, but still tough for us. Our first match, against Wales, will be very important. A good start to a tournament is what everyone wants.

Wales, Russia and England are all physical opponents...
In March, we played a friendly against the Republic of Ireland. I think they play the same as Wales, who, will be a tough opponent to beat. Gareth Bale is special for them, but they also play as a team. Russia are always good and have a good defence. And England were again good in qualifying.

Dream...Adam Nemec would love to meet Czech Republic in the Final

Which team would you most like to face in France?
We have the same history and are neighbours, so to play against the Czech Republic in the Final would be a dream for me and everybody in Slovakia. But we have no problems with the players. There is no hate. Just like Russia, our second opponent. There is no rivalry. A lot of players weren't even born when the Berlin wall fell.

What has been the secret of the Slovakian team's success?
The current team is a bunch of friends. We have no groups in the team and nobody feels himself to be greater than anyone else. There is no jealousy. We all want to work together. When we come together there is a group of decent, humble guys. Marek Hamsik is the biggest name in the team. He was my room-mate for the under-21s but now we have single rooms. Hamsik couldn't go about normally on the streets of Napoli, but when he is with the national team he is just one of the guys. You wouldn't know that he is one of the greatest players in the Serie A.

What is your role in the team?
We play always a 4-5-1 system. I am the central striker up front. When the ball comes to me I have to control it and look to see what my team-mates are doing. In qualifying I scored three goals. Not bad, but it could be better.

Interview by Sander Berends/ESM

THE PLAYER: DAVID DE GEA

What are your expectations in France?
I'm full of enthusiasm going into the Euros. I'm in very high spirits and hoping to have a great tournament to help Spain retain our title and be crowned champions for the third time in a row.

Do you think you'll start?
I hope so, just like everyone called up by the coach will hope to. I'm prepared for whatever Del Bosque decides and just want to help the team.

What's Iker Casillas like as team-mate, captain and a rival for a starting spot?
Iker has been a captain for practically a lifetime, first at Real Madrid and then for the national team. I'm full of respect for everything he's done in the game. He's an exemplary captain: he's always helping out, encouraging others and contributing in any way he can. I have a good relationship with him. He's someone everyone looks up to. He's an exemplary captain, just like [vice-captain] Sergio Ramos. The national team have two great captains, who are role models in every sense.

What will it take to lift the trophy?
In these sorts of tournaments, form sometimes prevails over talent and ability because it's all over in a month. I'm expecting a high-quality European Championship. It'll be like a World Cup and I believe, and hope, that the best team will win it and that that'll be Spain. You need quality, a tight-knit unit and a certain amount of good fortune – the luck of champions.

In the group stage you'll be up against Petr Cech, one of your idols...
He's a great keeper, one of the best out there. I have a good relationship with him because he's shown me that, as well as being an outstanding goalie, he's an exceptional guy, a great person. I like facing him and it'll be good to see him in France.

Do you see anyone as clear favourites?
The usual suspects: Germany, France, Spain, England. They're arguably on another level and I'm sure they'll be in the mix for the title, but I'm also convinced a surprise package will emerge and go far. These short tournaments are conducive to that and someone unfancied always makes a mark. Watch out for Croatia.

Can Belgium be regarded as one of these potential dark horses?
Belgium are no longer dark horses. They have got some great players and they're going to show as much. I don't think anyone would be surprised to see them in the latter stages of the competition.

Interview by Carlos Carpio/ESM

Spain

Strengths
A huge squad of high-calibre technicians. The winning mentality of players from Barca, Real and Atletico Madrid.

Weaknesses
Possible burn-out after a tight La Liga race and a full compliment of Champions League commitments.

Wild Card
Athletic Bilbao's 35-year-old target man Aritz Aduriz, marked his international return with a goal against Italy.

Controversial Player
Defender Marc Bartra has hardly featured for Barcelona this season but is a Del Bosque favourite.

Special mention
This will be Iker Casillas' fifth Euro finals. He says he will have to accept it if David De Gea replaces him as a starter.

Media expectation
Should *La Roja* not make the semi-finals, the fur will fly.

Tournament objectives
A place in history. A third straight continental crown.

Past Inspiration
The last Euros in France in 1984, when they made the Final.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
England. Sixty-six years since they last beat them in proper competition.

THE COACH: VICENTE DEL BOSQUE

Spain have won the last two European Championships. What is your target for the upcoming tournament?
We're aiming as high as possible: to defend the title we won four years ago. It's the same situation as at Euro 2012, albeit with a little more pressure because we're defending back-to-back titles. That said, it's important to distinguish between goals and requirements. Winning the title cannot be seen as a minimum requirement. During the draw in Paris, I looked around and was struck by the thought that out of the 24 coaches that were there, only one of us can win it.

Was what happened in the 2014 World Cup a helping of humble pie?
No, because we never saw ourselves as the best or unbeatable. I reject the idea that there was ever a problem with a lack of humility. It was purely a footballing matter: we lost to teams who were better than us on the pitch. We never made excuses. We're keen to get things right at the Euros. Whenever you lose, you can learn an important lesson from it.

Spain kick off against the Czech Republic...
We know that winning that match would give us a certain amount of peace of mind in terms of going through. They're a team very much from the Central European school. They may not have the big names of the past, but they left the Netherlands, who finished third at the World Cup, in their wake in qualifying. That speaks volumes.

What would you pick out about Turkey?
Above all, the fact that their players are very passionate when they pull on their country's shirt; they're fighters. They may sometimes be somewhat disorganised, but they're always very combative.

And Croatia...
The quality they have goes without saying. We all know all about Modric, Rakitic, Kovacic and Halilovic, but they've got numerous other very good players. We haven't forgotten how tough we found it to beat them at Euro 2012.

What sort of Euros do you envisage?
Football is increasingly evenly matched, there are fewer and fewer contrasts, and it's all more globalised. Now it's much less likely that a player or team will turn up and surprise you, breaking the mould with the way they play.

Do you view the expansion to 24 teams as a good thing?
Yes. It's going to be a party. This sort of tournament really causes a buzz among fans. There are smaller countries, like the two Irelands, who are sure to have a big following. Football becoming more open is a good thing.

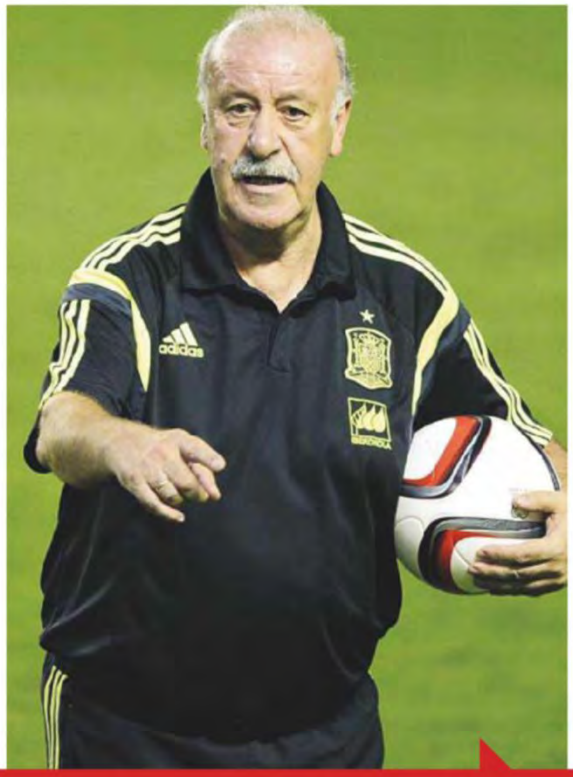
Are you proud that Spain's style of play has influenced other countries?
Whenever you win, and especially if you string together titles like Spain did, you become trendsetters. Spanish coaches didn't used to go abroad before and now there are several highly qualified ones plying their trade in a variety of countries.

Are you expecting teams to park the bus against you at the Euros?
I don't think they will. It would suit us just fine if the opposition only focused on defending. I wish we always had the initiative! That's the team's style, to dictate games, while always being mindful that our defensive efforts have to begin at the front, in the knowledge that we leave wide-open expanses further back that need protecting.

Are you worried by how Spain have struggled to score recently?
Spain are always talked about as an attacking side, but we haven't been all that free-scoring. We've relied on goals from [Fernando] Torres and [David] Villa. Let's see if we change that dynamic.

Interview by Carlos Carpio/ESM

Aim...Vicente Del Bosque hopes to lead Spain to a third straight Euro title



"Whenever you win, and especially if you string together titles like Spain did, you become trendsetters"

Sweden

Strengths
Zlatan's inimitable magic. Cast-iron team ethic. The vitality of the under-21s who won the Euro title last year.

Weaknesses
Dependance on Zlatan. Not enough pace on the break.

Wild Card
Up-and-coming centre-back Victor Lindelhof has passed his international initiation test with flying colours.

Controversial Player
To the amazement of many, coach Erik Hamren continues to ignore in-form left-back Oscar Wendt.

Special mention
Hamren is due to leave his post at the end of the tournament, making way for Norrkoping boss Janne Andersson.

Media expectation
Pundits and writers have never taken to Hamren's style of football, finding it short on tempo and initiative.

Tournament objectives
The coach has been ploughing a pessimistic furrow of late, suggesting that a quarter-final spot was a bridge too far.

Past Inspiration
Ibrahimovic's back-heeled goal equaliser in a 1-1 draw with Italy at Euro 2004. Audacious art at the death.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Germany. Twenty-eight years since they last beat them.

THE COACH: ERIK HAMREN

How do you see your group?
If we look at it realistically, we are not favourites to progress to the knockout stage. Belgium and Italy are huge favourites in our group and we are the underdog, so to speak. I don't think you can expect us to progress, but it goes without saying that we're going to try our best. I mean, it wasn't realistic that we should be able to beat Denmark in the play-offs, based on the two teams' results over the last 10 years. But we did.

How are you going to beat the odds?
We have to hit the optimal level of play like we did against Denmark, especially in the first play-off game at home in Stockholm. We played a really good game that evening, and we have to reach that level of performance in all three games, against Ireland, Italy and Belgium. We have to give each other the energy and belief we need on the pitch. Of course, we have to play good football, but we also need to have a good attitude in camp from the leaders of the team, from everyone present.

There must be quite a difference between coming together for qualifiers and friendlies, and being in camp and playing games in France for weeks...
That is one of the main differences between going to the finals and meeting up for one or two games. It puts more stress and higher demands on the players, but I think we've got the right squad. The players' attitude is probably one of the reasons why we got here in the first place and produced the necessary results even when we've been through tough spells. These players are also a great group of personalities who respect and stay loyal to their team-mates.

You call Italy and Belgium favourites, but have you found some way of getting the better of your opponents...
Sure, we have. But Italy, Belgium and Ireland have surely also found something they think are Swedish weak points. We have watched all three opponents closely and I am sure they're doing the same with us. No matter what, Belgium and Italy are the favourites, and it will take a great effort from us and probably a little bit of luck to progress. We need to be at 100 per cent every minute of the tournament.

How do you approach what are going to be your last games with Sweden?
Right now, during preparations and going into the tournament, my approach is no different than it would be if I expected to stay in the position for another 10 years. I've got all the energy and focus on the tournament, so in that way it is no different. But when the tournament is over, it is going to be emotional for me.

"It will take a great effort from us and probably a little bit of luck to progress"

Finale...Erik Hamren will step down after the tournament in France

Amazing...Zlatan Ibrahimovic

You are probably hoping that your players give you a proper send off too?
Yes, I hope so! This is likely also to be the final tournament and final days for some of our players' international careers. It is going to be a special occasion and feeling for them too, like it will surely be for me.

The focus will surely be on Zlatan Ibrahimovic. What effect does this have on your side?
It is not going to be any different from what we are already used to. He plays an important role for Sweden and he has always had this type of immense focus on him. It is not going to affect him or the team, we've been good at handling it.

How do you see his form coming into the Euro after a great club season?
He is an amazing player and an amazing man. It is great to have someone like him in a squad, someone who takes responsibility for the team. I've only got positive things to say about him. He is a unique player. In my opinion, he is one of the three best footballers in the world, and it is something special to coach a player like him.

Interview by Troels Bager Thogersen/ESM

THE PLAYER: ERIK JOHANSSON

You met some of your Italian opponents before with Malmo...
Yes, we played Juventus in 2014. It was a strange game for us, I got sent off as well. I really like Leonardo Bonucci and his style of play, I have to say I prefer him to Chiellini, who is great as well. Bonucci reads the game so well. He hardly ever misses a tackle and he understands and reads every aspect of the game.

And what do you think of Belgium?
They've excellent players with individual skills, but if they don't succeed in creating a great team too, they could get into trouble. That is a really important point for them, and it doesn't help that Kompany is out of the tournament with an injury.

Do people in Sweden see Ireland as the easy fixture?
There is no such thing as a walkover. It is going to be an important game for us since it is the first game in the group. If we win, we should have a good Euro. We've definitely ended up in a strong group, but if we stick together and play the type of games we want to, things should be good. It is so important to stress that we need to be a strong unit. Sweden has traditionally had a strong collective, and then, of course, we've got Zlatan to create something extraordinary.

How do you feel about playing in France, in front of thousands of fans in great stadiums?
I am actually quite happy the tournament takes place there. I go to Paris fairly often. I've got several friends who live in the city and it is one of my favourite places in the world. And to play a Euro in France is just going to be special. I like the lifestyle, the culture, the clothes and the great food. I speak a little French after learning the language in high school, and I like speaking the language, even though I am not very good at it. I'd like to live in Paris some day.

Is the team prepared for the chaos that will follow Zlatan in France?
It is not going to affect him, he is used to all the attention. I don't think it plays a significant role for us. We might have a bit of a laugh though when we see all the journalists falling over themselves to catch his every word, it can be quite amusing to see how wild it sometimes gets.

Can Sweden make it deep into the knockout stage?
We have to believe so. We want to progress from our group. I think Italy could do well. It's a feeling I have. They've a good squad and a good coach in Antonio Conte, who knows how to get a team effort out of his players.

Interview by Troels Bager Thogersen/ESM

THE COACH: VLADIMIR PETKOVIC

In your group, France are probably favourites, while Albania and Romania are considered underdogs. Would you agree?
France are the favourites in our group and rightly they are most frequently mentioned as one of the favourites to win the title. I hope that in the third game of Group A, between Switzerland and France, we're playing for first place in the group. In order to get there we must put in our maximum performances in the previous matches against Albania and Romania respectively. Albania take part for the first time at the Euro finals. They are full of euphoria, they're strong offensively, well organised and unpredictable. In addition to that, there will be also lot of emotions in this game. Romania are unbeaten in the last two years. It's a team with an impressive stability in defence and a very solid organisation. So, they will be a hard nut to crack – not only for us.

Normal...coach Vladimir Petkovic embraces non-Swiss nationals in the side

Who are favourites to win the title?
At the Euros there are currently the strongest teams of Europe. The field of participants is bigger than ever, but it's also very evenly matched. There is no clear favourite, but there are some teams with title potential like Germany, England, France, Italy and Spain. But I think that also some other teams could go far – teams with whom people at this point do not count. That happens at almost every tournament.

What's your feeling about foreign-born players in the Swiss team?
This is very simple. The national team reflects multicultural Switzerland. In companies, schools and in institutions there should be a lot of people with immigrant backgrounds so why not in the national football team? But we must not use this as a reason to have a debate about "*Secondos*". For example, if a player with an immigrant background has a poor day, this can simply happen and it's completely normal, but it doesn't mean he didn't play with his full heart for Switzerland. Several players have been proving that for years. They don't deny their roots, but they always play with full heart for Switzerland.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

Switzerland

Strengths
The excellent goalkeeping of Yann Sommer. Flair for scoring late goals. Xherdan Shaqiri's creativity.

Weaknesses
The poor self-control of Valon Behrami and Granit Xhaka. No proven goalgetter at the point of attack.

Wild Card
Playmaker or centre-forward Shani Tarashaj made his debut in March.

Controversial Player
Many Swiss pundits have identified Hoffenheim centre-back Fabian Schar as a weak link.

Special mention
Vladimir Petkovic is not flavour of the month, accused of boring football and making excessive wage demands.

Media expectation
With key players injured or not playing for their clubs, a degree of pessimism has taken hold.

Tournament objectives
Inside the camp, chest-beating bravado rules. In reality, progress to the quarter-finals would satisfy everyone.

Past Inspiration
Their battling 1-1 draw with hosts England on the opening day of Euro 96.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Their former boss Roy Hodgson and England, who they have only beaten once in a competitive fixture.

THE PLAYER: VELON BEHRAMI

Your parents are Kosovan-Albanian so how do you feel about playing against Albania in the opening game?
We played in a qualification match for the 2014 World Cup against them. It was a special game for me. It was the first time I have been a little more nervous than I am used to being before a game. But then when you are on the pitch you don't think about these kind of things. Now is the third time we have played them. Of course, it is the most important one as it is the first game of the Euros. It is always like a Final, because if you lose the first game you are almost out. It will be difficult to manage the emotion, but we have to think that it is just a game at the end of the day – even if it is not. There will be emotion on the pitch. My parents live there [in Albania], so it is going to be strange. But I chose 11 years ago to play for Switzerland and it was the best choice for me.

How did you make that decision?
There was about two to three months where I had to decide. I was 20 and I had to decide which national team I wanted to play for. Switzerland gave me the opportunity to play football, to be who I am now and to have a good career. For me, the decision at the end of the day was very easy.

Decision...Velon Behrami chose Switzerland over Albania 11 years ago

> "It is just the revolution of football, which involves a lot of players not born in their country but who just grew up there"

How do you feel about playing for a country other than that of your birth?
It is just the revolution of football, which involves a lot of players not born in their country but who just grew up there. I think it is fair. In Switzerland they spend a lot of money on young players, even for their education. They spend a lot of money and they deserve this type of product, even if the players were not born there.

You played when Switzerland were co-hosts. How much extra pressure is there as the host nation?
Obviously it is a bit difficult to play at home. I played the Euros at home in 2008 and there was a lot of pressure. We couldn't handle it and that's why we got eliminated. But I think France have enough experience to handle the pressure like this.

Switzerland have not qualified for the Euros since 2008 but you've played in three World Cups. What was highlight of those tournaments for you?
The last World Cup was the best for me. We got eliminated in extra-time against Argentina and I was one of the main players. In 2006 I played just a couple of minutes and in 2010 I got a red card, so that was a very, very bad experience. The last World Cup I was feeling more important for the team and for the coach.

What are Switzerland's realistic hopes in France?
The ambition should be a little bit higher than the last tournament. Of course, the quarter-finals would be a great result for us. But it is the kind of thing where you can expect everything. We could lose in the first round or go all the way to the semi-finals, it depends on the moment and where we are. When we arrive a lot of players need to be fit. We have time to work on that and we just need to find some good momentum. The difficultly with Switzerland is we have a lot of cultures mixed together and to find the combination for the success is not that easy compared to other countries.

Tell us about Vladimir Petkovic?
I've known him since I was young, but he has improved a lot. His ideas are fresh and everyone follows him. It was good because he didn't change so much in terms of the discipline side – like the time to come back to the hotel and the time off we have. That was really intelligent. On the pitch, we are more dominant and have better ball possession. That is what we wanted to do with him, and we did it well, but there are a lot of things to improve. That has to come from the players because he is doing a great job. He gives us the direction.

Interview by Simon Collings

Turkey

Strengths
Warrior mindset encouraged by coach Fatih Terim. Lots of discipline, even in adversity. The rare skills of Hakan Calhanoglu.

Weaknesses
Tend to switch off when defending set-pieces. Paucity of striking options. Not the most careful in possession.

Wild Card
Midfielder Yunus Malli, who played for Germany's under-21s but has now opted for his parents' homeland.

Controversial Player
Gokhan Tore would have made the squad if he had not seen red in the final qualifier.

Special mention
In their three previous Euro finals (1996, 2000 and 2008), they have improved each time.

Media expectation
No matter they missed the last three big tournaments. Bags of bravado and upbeat predictions.

Tournament objectives
Terim would never say so publicly, but he would be overjoyed just to reach the second round.

Past Inspiration
Scoring two late, late goals to turn a 2-1 deficit into a 3-2 win over the Czechs in a Euro 2008 group game.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
England, a team they have yet to beat in 10 tries.

THE COACH: FATIH TERIM

How do you feel after a difficult qualifying campaign?
Well, I've made several statements before that Turkey really doesn't like to reach the finals the easy way. We like to have tension all the time! We had chances before in the group stage but did not take them. It all came down to the last game. But we had to work for it. My team showed character and we got the points we needed right at the end. We had a bit of luck but my team deserved to be in the finals.

What are your thoughts on your opponents in France?
Its a tough group. Spain are former world and European champions. Croatia are a young team that never gives up and has an experienced coach. And Czech Republic are the most unpredictable of opponents. So I have to say, it's going to be hard work for us to gain access to the second round. If we have a good start, and that's the Croatia game, I think we can go all the way.

All the way? Do you mean the Final?
Turkey has a completely new team. New young players are determined to show what they have got in their locker. My players know the expectations at home are high. Like I said, they showed some good character in the group stage. They got the results they had to. Now it's up to them to make their country proud again. They'll fight until the last minute. If they really fight they can achieve a lot I think. We played a semi-final in the past, why not a Final in France? We have the potential.

You mean like in 2008?
Turkey has that kind of power in their DNA. They never give up. We established that back in 2008. We had great fitness coaches. They showed my players that a game is 90 minutes. They knew that Turkey had potential. We had an experienced team. It seemed a lot of games that we were lucky, but to be lucky you have to fight. We fought against much stronger and more experienced teams but showed that we can beat any team that time. Playing the semi-final was great. At some stages of that game we outclassed Germany. Everybody said that we deserved to be in the Final, but that's football. Maybe this time it's going to work out.

> "When a game starts, I'm the trainer but also I feel like a player or a fan, and like a father to my family, my team. I can't hide my feelings"

Character...Fatih Terim believes his team have what it takes to succeed

Much has been written and said about your behaviour on the bench...
When a game starts, I'm the trainer but also I feel like a player or a fan and like a father to my family, my team. I can't hide my feelings. I can't concentrate on the cameras if they're filming me. I can't control what they film. I'm trying to live the game as it happens. That's my character, I can't hide it. My feelings direct me, I'm not directing my feelings. Of course sometimes when I watch things that I have done during a game, I say to myself, "that was unnecessary" but I can't help it, that's me..

What is the real strength of your team?
We fight as a team. So my players are trying to play like a team. We showed in some critical games at home that if we are in a good mood, nobody can stop us. Maybe its a disadvantage that there are some young players who have never played in a big tournament but I made some changes in our staff and got ex-players like Nihat, Tuncay and Tumer back so they can help young players to improve and show them that they shouldn't be worried about inexperience, but they should concentrate on their own qualities.

Who do you see as the favourites?
For the first time there are 24 teams. In our group Spain can again dominate, Germany is always disciplined and is a final tournament team. France is host and is a dangerous opponent. But we as Turkey are determined to go as far as we can. Therefore we are expecting that our fans will be with us, because we would like to show them that again we can show the world that we are a good football country.

Interview by Mehmet Demircan/ESM

THE PLAYER: ARDA TURAN

How do you see your chances?
First off all, we're happy to compete in France. Nobody expected that we would make it to the finals. We had a terrible start in the group stage, but me and my team-mates always believed in ourselves. We fought back and finally we made it. Now it's up to us. After the draw the expectations were not that positive, but with our fans' backing we can ensure that we will do anything to make our country happy.

Are you confident?
We have a young squad who wants to prove itself. And everybody knows hungry people are dangerous. I have trust in my team-mates. In the group stage we proved that when needed, we're there. Our coach tells us that if we fight, we can make a big surprise. I tell you, we're going to fight!

Confident...Arda Turan has faith in his side's young guns

How will a young team cope against such teams as Spain and Croatia?
Yes, our team is not that experienced, but we have the quality and the spirit of young guns. We love to fight from our heart. We know that's important because our country is having a difficult time at the moment. We want our people to be proud of us.

You were banned by FIFA but still did well in the group stage. How come?
Many people were asking the same question. How did I manage to stay fit when not playing for Barcelona? Well, I trained hard, I kept myself in shape. It was hard to concentrate but I thought that I couldn't fail because my country needed me. I got a lot of help from the Barcelona training staff and also my coach Fatih Terim supported me a lot.

What is your personal goal in France?
I had a great 2008 tournament and in France we want to repeat that. I also want to play in a World Cup finals. We hope we qualify for 2018. Personally, I am having a great time with Barcelona. I'm happy in Spain, but I want to achieve more. Turkey has enough potential. If I work as hard enough as I did all season, I think I will have a great tournament. I feel in shape, I'm confident.

Interview by Mehmet Demircan/ESM

THE PLAYER: ANDRIY YARMOLENKO

What was the main reason for your success in qualifying?
I am very glad that our generation was able to remove the curse of the play-offs and reach the European finals. It seems to me that the key to our success in the play-off battles against Slovenia was the fact that, in the current team, almost no players had previously had bad experience of defeats in the play-offs. So finally our dream came true.

What experience did you gain from participating in Euro 2012?
Looking back at four years ago, I can say that I experienced mixed emotions. We had a great game against Sweden and then lost to France. In the end, we were unlucky to lose to England. Who knows what would have happened had we won that game?

What do you think about your group?
Germany with their status of reigning world champions, are above the others. This is a very strong team, but the others did not qualify for the finals simply by luck. For example, I expect a tough game against Northern Ireland, who are famous for their never-say-die attitude while Poland are a battling side with a prolific scorer and leader in Robert Lewandowski.

How will you cope with the pressure going in to such a big tournament?
With so much preview talk filling your head, you can lose concentration and the quality of your game will suffer. The body begins to work differently and to restore order is problematic. I try to take everything gradually.

What is your aim at Euro 2016?
Our first task is to qualify from the group. I am not going to talk about individual tasks. I think that football is a team game and you need to set goals by common efforts of the whole team. First, we have to get out of the group, and then we will see whom we get.

Is that a realistic target?
I can imagine there will be hype around all the matches, but I must say before the start of every game against any rival in the group, our chances will be 50-50.

What does it mean to you personally to participate at Euro 2016?
We will play for our country and for me, personally, it is an honour to defend the yellow-and-blue colours. All of Ukraine will support us, so we must try to win every game. For us, the names of the opponents are not as important as the quality of our game. If we play good football, that will be a victory.

Interview by Oleg Zadernovsky

Play-off...Andriy Yarmolenko celebrates his goal against Slovenia

Ukraine

Strengths
Formidable back-line unit. Threat on the counter-attack. Ability to deliver from corners and free-kicks.

Weaknesses
Mediocre game management. Lack of killer instinct. A tendency among certain players to lose self-control.

Wild Card
Shakhtar Donetsk attacking midfielder Viktor Kovalenko made an impressive debut against Wales in March.

Controversial Player
For many, centre-back Yevhen Khacheridi is too prone to temperamental blackouts.

Special mention
In terms of morale and experience, adding Andriy Shevchenko to the coaching staff makes sense.

Media expectation
The press in Kiev have never taken to the dour approach of coach Mykhailo Fomenko.

Tournament objectives
Fomenko says his aim is to win Euro 2016. Rip off the mask and a place in the round of 16 will be sufficient.

Past Inspiration
USSR's runners-up spot at Euro 88 was built on Ukrainian excellence on the pitch and in the dug-out.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
France. Only one win in nine against the hosts.

THE COACH: MYKHAILO FOMENKO

Is there a big difference between preparing for France and for the 2012 Euros when you were co-hosts?
Of course. We have our plan, which differs from the one Oleh Blokhin had four years ago. The most important thing is that now we are not under great pressure from the media and fans as for Euro 2012 when we played all three group matches at home.

Many of your players have now had experience of playing in a big finals tournament. That was not the case four years ago...
You are right. It is also one more factor which we expect will help us. We have quite a number of players that already have experience of playing in the European Championship. They will tell the younger players what lies ahead.

How important is the fact that, unlike last time, Ukraine have finally qualified after a play-off?
It is very important. I think it is always a difficult situation for the team from the country which hosts the finals. In other words, it is a completely different kind of preparation to playing only friendlies. Now we have passed through a very tough qualifying group and reached the finals by only beating Slovenia after the play-offs for the first time in our history. It required from the players some character, I have to say!

There is an argument that some of your players are not having enough playing time with their clubs...
That's true. This year in the Ukraine Premier League, players do not have as many matches as usual [only 14 clubs started the season and Metalurh Zaporizhia went bankrupt during the winter]. Therefore, they have less playing practice. But I believe that national-team players understand that competition like the Euro finals can happen once in a lifetime and will compensate it by hard work in training.

What was the reason for two training camps before the tournament in Italy and Switzerland?
We decided to travel there with the clear purpose of avoiding problems with acclimatisation when the team arrives in France. After the friendly against Romania on May 29 the team will move to Ascona in Switzerland where we will conduct training sessions before going to France.

Where you will you stay in France?
We will stay during the period of preparation and participation at Aix-en-Provence, located in the south of France, about 30 km north of Marseille. The team will conduct training sessions at Georges-Carcassonne Stadium on a pitch with natural grass.

How do you rate Ukraine's group opponents?
We have some experience of playing Poland. Now they have reached their highest level. There is no need to say something about Germany, the reigning world champions. Northern Ireland are not underdogs at all. They play a typically British style of football and are not an easy rival either. Every match will require complete discipline and motivation.

What would you like to achieve with your team at Euro 2016?
It is necessary always to have serious ambitions. Taking into account the teams that we have to play, our priority is to qualify from the group.

How will you motivate your players?
We need to give our players time to recover from the season, get rid of all the negatives, accommodate all the positives and be prepared to give everything. It's the Euro finals, after all!

Interview by Oleg Zadernovsky

Two camps...Mykhailo Fomenko will take his squad to Italy and Switzerland

"We are not under great pressure from the media and fans as for Euro 2012"

Wales

Strengths
Tight-knit group on a career-defining mission. Organisation and excellent work in possession. Gareth Bale.

Weaknesses
Vulnerability defending set-pieces. Lack of international-class strikers.

Wild Card
Centrally or out wide, Crystal Palace's attacking midfielder Jonny Williams is full of spark and invention.

Controversial Player
First-choice front man Hal Robson-Kanu has been totally out of form for club side Reading.

Special mention
Wales have come a long way since just seven fans took the trouble to support them in a friendly in Norway in 1985.

Media expectation
Hard not to be excited at a first finals in 58 years, but no breast-beating bravado. Tempered optimism.

Tournament objectives
Chris Coleman insists they are not there to make up the numbers. And that means the second round at least.

Past Inspiration
Made the quarter-finals of the 1976 Euros before being edged out by Yugoslavia.

Team to avoid in knockout phase
Croatia, a team they always find too hot to handle.

THE COACH: CHRIS COLEMAN

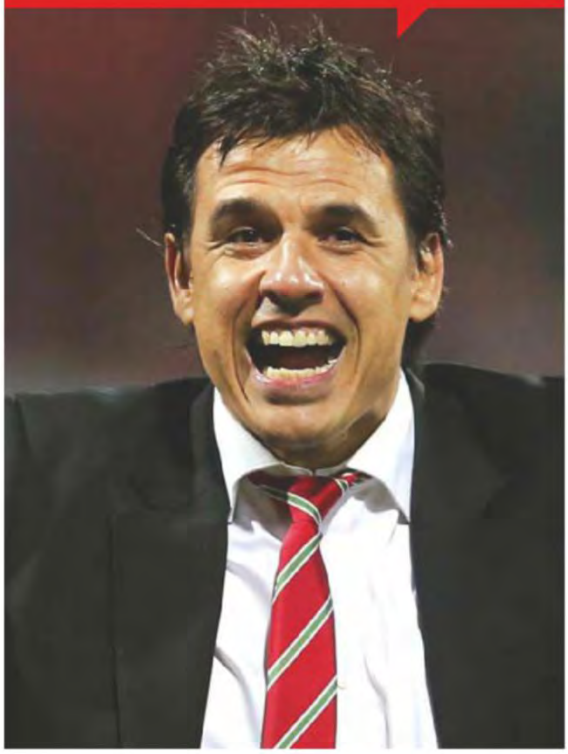
What does it mean to lead this team at Euro 2016?
It's my biggest achievement and biggest honour, and my most enjoyable achievement in football. I was lucky enough to play for Wales and even more privileged to manage them, and to achieve what we did was icing on the cake. Wherever I go afterwards, whatever I do in football, I don't think I'll ever beat that feeling after walking off the pitch in Bosnia when we realised what we'd done.

Inevitably there is huge excitement about Wales v England. Is it justified?
I didn't really want them in our group, not because we're afraid of matching up against them on the pitch, but because of all the hoo-hah that goes with England. It is like going to France to play a derby, and I am sure the hype will dominate the build-up. But we have them and we have to deal with it. We're not thinking about them now, though. We are only thinking about Slovakia. It's all about getting out of the group and into the last 16, and then dealing with that challenge.

Presumably the fans would love to win the England game above all other?
It's pointless beating England if we don't get through – it won't mean anything. There is a sort of circus with that game, all the hype surrounding England, and we don't want to get involved in that. I know Roy Hodgson very well and he's someone I respect a lot. They won 10 out of 10 in qualifying and they are always going to be tough. But whoever you play, you know it will be difficult because there are no easy games at this level. We're certainly not easy to play against either, and won't be sitting ducks.

How important is Gareth Bale to Wales?
He's integral to us, really, both on and off the pitch. He stands out on the pitch because he's "noisy"; not in what he says but his actions. As an attacker he is incredibly aggressive and very demanding of himself. His standards set the bar for everybody else to aspire to. People use the word "great" lightly, but he is genuinely a great player, one of the best in the world, and he plays for us. Off the pitch he's quiet, a family man but hugely passionate about his country. He's easy to work with and brings out the best in all of us. We recognise what we have in him and we have to utilise him the best we can.

> "It's pointless beating England if we don't get through – it won't mean anything"



Who are favourites to win in France?
Football is an amazing sport, always full of surprises, and that is the beauty of the game. Greece won it in 2004, Denmark won it in 1992 when they came in through the back door, having hardly trained for it. Teams going into a tournament in form might not hit the right notes, while others who are not fancied can get it together during the tournament and hit all the right notes. That's the great thing – it gives everybody a chance. I'm really excited but I couldn't tell you who'll win. People talk about Germany, France, England as favourites, but you never know what's going to happen – and we may just be one of those "you-never-know" teams!

Is there a sense you are making history?
My father talked about the great Welsh players of the past, going back to 1958: John Charles, Cliff Jones and Ivor Allchurch were all incredible players. It has been a long time since then, and there has been a big psychological barrier, with the pressure on every time there was a tournament we failed to reach, even when we had a good squad, like the one we have now. We've broken down those barriers now and this group will be remembered in the history of Welsh football – and rightly so.

You have said before that you want this to be just a start for Welsh football...
This was all about qualifying, but I said to the FA of Wales that it is not just about qualifying once, it is making sure we can do it again and again, putting in place a structure that will allow us to do that. We've improved a lot of things on and off the pitch, and we need to keep improving in those areas.

Interview by Gerry Cox

THE PLAYER: ASHLEY WILLIAMS

You've gone from non-league to captaining a Premier League club in Europe and winning silverware at Wembley. Does what you're about to experience top it all?

I said before the campaign even started that, 100 per cent, it would be the proudest moment of my career. But it's nothing to do with me as an individual. I've been pretty fortunate to have some big occasions in club football, having had to start at the bottom, things like winning promotion with Swansea City in a play-off Final, all that goes with the Premier League and then the League Cup win, but this is something else for a few reasons. There's the history side of things when you look back at some of the great players to play for Wales who never got this opportunity – players like Ryan Giggs, Ian Rush, Neville Southall, Kevin Ratcliffe, Gary Speed of course, and Mark Hughes – and it reminds you how special it is. We're all aware of the history of Wales as a side and what it means to the entire nation so that means so much.

There's been so many near-misses for Wales in qualifying over the decades. When did you think this campaign would be different?

I think it was out in Belgium. Getting the draw out there really hammered home to us, and others, the belief we could do it. And then we took it up a level with the performance and the result out in Israel, and we knew then we had a real chance. When we beat Belgium at home we knew it was in our hands then and we weren't going to let it go.

It must help having Gareth Bale...

Of course it does, he would be a boost to any team in the world. He's unbelievable, world class, and showed that through the campaign. He gives the dressing room a lift every time you look up because you know he can win games and, as a defender, you know that, if you do your job, then you're giving him that chance against whoever you are playing. The best thing about Gareth, though, is he's one of the lads, he's not a superstar like that. He didn't change when he went to Real Madrid as a person, though I think you can see he's improved as a player. He's part of the jokes in the dressing room and he'll put as much work in on the training ground as any of us.

How do you think Wales will do?

We've not thought like that. It's exciting to think about being there, although it's hard to imagine what it will be like when we get out there against Slovakia. I think the message will be to enjoy it because it's a new experience, but we are there for business and we want to give a good account of ourselves.

Interview by Chris Wathan

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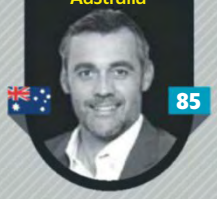

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Clash...Vietnam's Nguyen Tuan Anh (right) and Chen Po-liang of Taiwan

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Champions...A-League winners Adelaide United

Born out of scandal

The 2016 Copa America will be held in the USA following the FIFAgate controversy

The Copa America, which was first staged in 1916, begins a line that leads directly to the birth of the World Cup. Held almost annually in the early years, the world's oldest continental tournament led to a rapid and huge rise, in both interest and in playing standards, of South American football.

This became abundantly clear when Uruguay caused a shock by cruising to the gold medal at the 1924 Paris Olympics, exhibiting a bold, balletic style of play that enthused those present. Four years later, in Amsterdam, they did it again, with Argentina winning silver.

It was obvious that a new competition was now needed that was open to all, amateurs and professionals alike, to find out who really was the best in the world. And so, just 14 years after the inaugural Copa, the first World Cup was staged – and won – by Uruguay.

The centenary of the Copa, then, is certainly something worth celebrating. However, it remains open to question as to whether June's tournament is the most suitable way of doing so.

For one thing, it is bizarre that South America has sought to commemorate such a significant event with a competition staged outside its borders. However, CONMEBOL – or, more precisely, those trading its TV rights – have long looked wide-eyed at the commercial opportunities of northward expansion. For over two decades, the Copa has invited Mexico to participate, usually with another CONCACAF nation, and Mexican clubs have been taking part in the Libertadores Cup since the late 1990s.

> "This will be the biggest soccer event [in the US] since the 1994 Fifa World Cup"
> Kathy Carter, president of Soccer United Marketing

Silverware...the Copa

Show...February's draw in New York

In this sense, then, the 2016 Copa is something like a return to the scene of a crime – as the so-called FIFAgate scandal was, in reality, all about South American companies bribing officials from both confederations to pick up media rights at prices well below market rates.

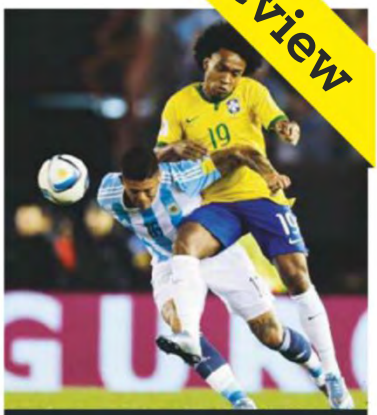
The confusion caused by the scandal's aftermath threatened the entire staging of the tournament, which was only confirmed towards the end of last year. The final deal has split the TV rights money between CONMEBOL and CONCACAF on a two-thirds to one-third basis, with the US organising committee only receiving money from the box office – which explains the high ticket prices, with the average price of tickets sold by mid-April being $250.

The other problem with this year's tournament has to do with the calendar. The Copa has had an uneven history, held annually at times but then with long gaps between tournaments at others. After falling into disuse, it was brought back in 1987 as a made-for TV competition which was staged every two years and taken round all 10 South American countries.

But things went awry in 1996 when South America introduced its current marathon World Cup qualification format, in which all the countries play each other home and away. While regular games and guaranteed income saw a dramatic rise in the standard of the less-traditional nations, having so much international football relegated the status of the Copa. As a result, the Copas of 1997, 1999, 2001 and 2004 all featured understrength, experimental squads.

A solution was found when it was decided the Copa should be held every four years. A year after the World Cup, the tournament now brings to an end a period of friendlies and kick-starts the next cycle of competitive action. The regular Copa, such as the one held last year in Chile, therefore serves as a dress rehearsal for the coming set of World Cup qualifiers.

However, the headache for this extra 2016 Copa is that those qualifiers are



Euro boys...Brazil's Willian (right) and Marcos Rojo of Argentina have had long club seasons

Success...Panama acknowledge their supporters after beating Cuba 4-0 in a play-off for a place at the Centennial Copa America

already well underway, and this year's competition clearly carries a risk of burning out the players.

All 10 South American nations played in last year's Copa, while the top six competed in Brazil 2014. For those players based in Europe, this could be their third consecutive summer without a full break – and a fourth in the case of those Brazilians and Uruguayans who also played the 2013 Confederations Cup.

With the 2016 Copa on the FIFA calendar, in theory clubs are obliged to release their players for the tournament. In practice, though, it would not be a surprise if some players are put under pressure to take a break, have a minor operation, and so on. And the South American national coaches might even be happy to go along with this.

Between September and November there are six rounds of World Cup qualifiers – a third of the campaign – and this is when the coaches will want their key players to be firing on all cylinders. Some coaches have already expressed disquiet about the amount of travelling they will have to do during the Copa, criss-crossing the US from coast to coast. Quite apart from the games, the travelling time may have a detrimental effect on already jaded players. So it is highly likely, then, that many of the South American nations will not be at full strength for the 2016 Copa.

But that does not make the event a complete farce. Tournaments tend to weave their own magic, and once underway their universe is restricted to those players who have turned up and others, no matter how great, can be forgotten about until after the trophy is handed over and normal life resumes.

Moreover, there are plenty of interesting angles. Brazil coach Dunga is under pressure. Argentina are smarting at not having won a senior title since 1993. Teams who have made a bad start to the Russia 2018 qualifiers have an invaluable opportunity to regroup. Venezuela have a new coach coming in. Chile's coach is almost as new and will relish the chance to impose his identity onto the team. There

will also be some very promising youngsters on show and one or two important international careers could start in the USA this June.

And then there is the view from CONCACAF, where the level of enthusiasm for this tournament is probably highest. Their representatives emerged with considerable credit from the last World Cup and now teams such as Panama have an opportunity to test themselves in competitive conditions against the more traditional powers from the south.

There is also the North American know-how and scale of operation to consider. An emphatic voice in favour of the tournament is that of Kathy Carter, the president of Soccer United Marketing, the commercial arm of USA's Major League Soccer. "The scale of the 2016 Copa America Centenario" she said in January, "will be, at a minimum, twice the size of the Copa America 2015, from both in-stadium attendance, global television reach and US market awareness.

"This will be the biggest soccer event [in the US] since the 1994 Fifa World Cup."

Given the progress the game has made in the US since then, there is a good chance this year's event will be bathed in a level of enthusiasm that can help the Copa 2016 overcome its own shortcomings.

Tim Vickery

Showpiece...the 82,566-capacity MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, will host the Final

Copa 2015...Chile's Gary Medel (left) and Mauricio Isla squeeze out Martin Smedberg-Dalence of Bolivia

SCHEDULE

GROUP STAGE

A

JUN 3
United States v Colombia
(Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara)
JUN 4
Costa Rica v Paraguay
(Orlando Citrus Bowl, Orlando)
JUN 7
United States v Costa Rica
(Soldier Field, Chicago)
JUN 7
Colombia v Paraguay
(Rose Bowl, Pasadena)
JUN 11
Paraguay v United States
(Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia)
JUN 11
Costa Rica v Colombia
(NRG Stadium, Houston)

B

JUN 4
Haiti v Peru
(CenturyLink Field, Seattle)
JUN 4
Brazil v Ecuador
(Rose Bowl, Pasadena)
JUN 8
Brazil v Haiti
(Orlando Citrus Bowl, Orlando)
JUN 8
Ecuador v Peru
(University of Phoenix Stadium, Glendale)
JUN 12
Haiti v Ecuador
(MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford)
JUN 12
Peru v Brazil
(Gillette Stadium, Foxborough)

C

JUN 5
Jamaica v Venezuela
(Soldier Field, Chicago)
JUN 5
Mexico v Uruguay
(University of Phoenix Stadium, Glendale)
JUN 9
Uruguay v Venezuela
(Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia)
JUN 9
Mexico v Jamaica
(Rose Bowl, Pasadena)
JUN 13
Venezuela v Mexico
(NRG Stadium, Houston)
JUN 13
Jamaica v Uruguay
(Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara)

D

JUN 6
Panama v Bolivia
(Orlando Citrus Bowl, Orlando)
JUN 6
Argentina v Chile
(Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara)
JUN 10
Chile v Bolivia
(Gillette Stadium, Foxborough)
JUN 10
Argentina v Panama
(Soldier Field, Chicago)
JUN 14
Panama v Chile
(Lincoln Financial Field, Philadelphia)
JUN 14
Bolivia v Argentina
(CenturyLink Field, Seattle)

QUARTER-FINALS

QF1

JUN 16
Winner Group A
v Runner-up Group B
(CenturyLink Field, Seattle)

QF2

JUN 17
Winner Group B
v Runner-up Group A
(MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford)

QF3

JUN 18
Winner Group C
v Runner-up Group D
(Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara)

QF4

JUN 18
Winner Group D
v Runner-up Group C
(Gillette Stadium, Foxborough)

SEMI-FINALS

JUN 21
Winner QF1 v Winner QF4
(NRG Stadium, Houston)

JUN 22
Winner QF2 v Winner QF3
(Soldier Field, Chicago)

THIRD-PLACE MATCH

JUN 25
(University of Phoenix Stadium, Glendale)

FINAL

JUN 26
(MetLife Stadium, East Rutherford)

Preview

US crowds will make for a successful Copa

Tournament will be the best yet, say controversial hosts USA

In 1994, the USA staged the best-attended World Cup in history, attracting an average attendance of 68,991 per game. And in 2014 – as a further example of just how lucrative the American soccer market can be – 109,000 people in Michigan saw Manchester United take on Real Madrid in a pre-season friendly.

It is that ability to pull in a crowd and generate revenue that sees the 100th anniversary of the Copa America staged outside South America for the first time.

"An anniversary is also a celebration," says Sunil Gulati, president of the US Soccer Federation (USSF), who are organising the tournament.

"And in thinking about how to celebrate the oldest confederation championship in the world, the leadership of CONMEBOL wanted to do something special.

"As CONCACAF teams have become part of the tradition of the competition, we were honoured to be asked to put on this event. The United States is uniquely suited to host; both as a destination for travelling fans as well as the millions of people living here whose heritage comes from the participating nations. We have the facilities, the infrastructure and the support to ensure a fantastic experience."

> **"We have the facilities, the infrastructure and the support to ensure a fantastic experience"**
> US Soccer Federation president Sunil Gulati

This summer's Copa is expected to draw far bigger crowds than any of the previous 44 tournaments as America's soccer fan base, boosted by the country's large immigrant communities, has such a big appetite for the international game.

While 2015's Copa America in Chile attracted 655,902 fans, at an average of 25,227 for the 26 games, the Copa America Centenario is expected to attract between in excess of 1.5million fans for 32 games. And that is in spite of ticket prices for Argentina v Chile in San Francisco, for example, ranging from $91 to $794. Three weeks before the tournament's kick-off, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Copa Centenario was top-selling summer U.S. sports event on the secondary-ticket market.

Local Copa stars... (left to right) Clint Dempsey (USA), Nelson Haedo Valdez (Paraguay), Oniel Fisher (Jamaica) and Jordan Morris (USA) are Seattle Sounders team-mates

"This event is going to be so big that we believe that it will equal or exceed domestic television ratings for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, and we all know how much that event grabbed hold of the country," says Kathy Carter of Soccer United Marketing, the marketing agency for the USSF.

The tournament looked in jeopardy at one point, due to the involvement of CONCACAF and CONMEBOL officials in the ongoing investigation into FIFA's activities. However, the US Soccer Federation announced in October last year that it would press ahead regardless.

"Given the time constraints that resulted from our insistence on ensuring that the tournament be conducted in a way that was fully transparent, we are thrilled with the partnerships we have developed in such a short window," says Gulati.

And staging this year's Copa, after failing to beat Qatar in the controversial vote for the 2022 World Cup, is a great opportunity to push the USA's claims for hosting the 2026 World Cup.

"We have spoken with pride and confidence about our ability to host world-class events, and this is another chance to demonstrate that," adds Gulati.

"We've showcased for more than 20 years our amazing facilities, incredible fan support and ability to deliver a financially successful tournament."

Mike Woitalla

COPA CENTENARIO VENUES & CAPACITIES

Gillette Stadium (Foxborough, MA)	**68,756**
MetLife Stadium (East Rutherford, NJ)	**82,500**
Lincoln Financial Field (Philadelphia)	**69,596**
Orlando Citrus Bowl (Orlando)	**70,000**
Soldier Field (Chicago)	**61,500**
NRG Stadium (Houston)	**71,500**
Rose Bowl (Pasadena, CA)	**92,542**
University of Phoenix Stadium (Glendale, AZ)	**63,400**
Levi's Stadium (Santa Clara, CA)	**68,500**
CenturyLink Field (Seattle)	**67,000**

GROUP A

USA (0 Copa wins)

The biggest tournament to be hosted by the US since the 1994 World Cup, the Copa will provide a good test for coach Jurgen Klinsmann and, one suspects, a new generation of youngsters.

Five years into his tenure, Klinsmann's current side appear to have regressed since their second-round appearance at the 2014 World Cup.

While veterans such as keepers Tim Howard (37) and Brad Guzan (31), midfielder Jermaine Jones (34) and striker Clint Dempsey (33) are still involved, Klinsmann could give youth a chance.

With Jozy Altidore out injured, strikers Jordan Morris and Bobby Wood, 21 and 23 respectively, are set to take centre stage, while 20-year-old defender Kellyn Acosta may get the chance to add to his World Cup qualifying appearances.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Bobby Wood
The striker scored 17 goals for second-tier Union Berlin in Germany last season and earned a €4m move to top-flight Hamburg.

▼ THE COACH

Jurgen Klinsmann
After finishing fourth in the Gold Cup on home soil, losing to Mexico in a play-off and World Cup loss to Guatemala, the pressure is on.

COLOMBIA (1 Copa win, in 2001)

Since reaching the last eight of the World Cup for the first time in 2014, Colombia had been a huge disappointment – until the last two rounds of 2018 qualifiers at the end of March, when Jose Pekerman's side put together back-to-back wins and climbed to fifth in the table.

Unusually for a Pekerman team, Colombia were lacking any midfield fluency. A change from 4-4-2 to 4-3-3 appears to have helped, along with the careful introduction of some younger players.

This, though, will make it difficult for Pekerman to administer his resources over the next few months. The country's talented under-23 generation have qualified for the Rio Olympics, making it tricky for the coach to decide which players should go to which tournament.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Edwin Cardona
Talented playmaker who is a fine striker of the ball, but doubts remain. For example, is he dynamic and mature enough for the top level?

▼ THE COACH

Jose Pekerman
The Argentinian took charge of his country at the 2006 World Cup. Appointed by Colombia in the early stages of the 2014 qualifiers.

COSTA RICA (0 Copa wins)

The 2014 World Cup seems a long time ago for the marauding band of Costa Ricans who took the competition by storm. Since then, they've lost their all-conquering coach Jorge Luis Pinto, tried all-time playing hero Paulo Wanchope as his replacement, but ultimately flattered to deceive at last year's Gold Cup.

Now under the guidance of former Alajuelense boss Oscar Ramirez, *Los Ticos* have enjoyed a steady stream of positive results, including an encouraging start to the 2018 World Cup qualifying campaign, during which they have yet to lose.

Ramirez has a talented group of players at his disposal and a recent 3-0 hammering of Gold Cup finalists Jamaica in the World Cup qualifiers suggests they may be back to near their best.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Joel Campbell
Still something of a bit-part player at club level, but his attacking know-how will be required for *Los Ticos* to make a dent in the competition.

▼ THE COACH

Oscar Ramirez
The Costa Rican FA originally wanted a foreign coach, but the 1990 World Cup hero has more than steadied the ship.

PARAGUAY (2 Copa wins, last in 1979)

"We've got to start giving some chances to young players," says coach Ramon Diaz about his approach to the Copa America. "Because they are the future."

It would seem to be code for the idea that Diaz is taking the long-term view, with individual promise more important than collective achievement.

His side have made a sound start to World Cup qualification and, although they lie seventh, they are just one point off the last automatic slot. But while Germany-based striker Dario Lezcano has proved a splendid Diaz discovery, there is still a concern over where the goals are going to come from.

And at the other end of the pitch, Paraguay will not always be able to rely on 36-year-old Paulo Da Silva organising the defence.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Tony Sanabria
The great hope, the 20-year-old Roma striker came through the youth ranks at Barcelona and has been on loan at Sporting Gijon.

▼ THE COACH

Ramon Diaz
Former Argentina international who took over after the last World Cup. His career also includes a spell in charge at Oxford United.

GROUP B

BRAZIL (8 Copa wins, last in 2007)

Brazil have got themselves in a contradictory position in terms of the Copa, with the official line being that it is not a priority as the main focus this year will be winning the Olympic gold medal – the only title open to them that they have never won.

However, a sticky start to World Cup qualification – Brazil are currently outside the play-off slot in sixth place – means coach Dunga is fighting for his job, with a crisis meeting in April apparently concluding that his fate hangs on what happens in the USA. This explains the strenuous – yet unsuccessful – efforts to include Neymar for the Copa, even though he is wanted for the Olympics.

At least Dunga will have some competitive games in which to consolidate the recent switch to 4-3-3.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Casemiro
Some good displays for Real Madrid woke a lobby pushing for his inclusion as a holding midfielder with a sound range of passing.

▼ THE COACH

Dunga
USA 94 World Cup-winning captain, first in charge from 2006 to 2010, and a highly controversial choice to return after the last World Cup.

ECUADOR (0 Copa wins)

Ecuador have made a superb start to World Cup qualification and already have around half the points needed to book a place in Russia.

Nevertheless, there is a problem. Although Ecuador have proved they are more than altitude specialists, with the exception of the 2006 World Cup their recent record in tournaments is poor.

In Chile last year they failed to make it out of their group and the last time they reached the quarter-finals was in 1997.

A good performance in the USA would do wonders for morale. And, unlike the qualifiers in March, Gustavo Quinteros will hope to have key players closer to match fitness.

If this is the case, Ecuador's speed and skill on the counter-attack should catch the eye.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Juan Cazares
Perky playmaker, full of bright ideas. An effective sub against tiring defences but was disappointing as a starter in March.

▼ THE COACH

Gustavo Quinteros
Argentinian-born former Bolivia international who was in the USA 94 squad. Took charge of Ecuador after the World Cup.

HAITI (0 Copa wins)

With players these days dotted around the leagues of Europe, USA and Asia, Haiti currently boast arguably the strongest squad in their history.

With a mix of homegrown players and recruits from the French and American diaspora, coach Patrice Neveu has plenty of pace at his disposal and his side will be a dangerous proposition on the counter-attack.

Neveu's side will look to get the ball out wide, whenever possible, and rely on talents such as Jeff Louis, Wilde Donald Guerrier and Jean-Eudes Maurice to cause problems for opponents.

While few will give *Les Grenadiers* a credible chance of advancing from their group, history has shown that when Haiti are labelled as the underdog they tend to excel.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Duckens Nazon
Almost quit the game when playing as an amateur in France, now a key component in Haiti's attack. Fast, skilful and reliable in front of goal.

▼ THE COACH

Patrice Neveu
Hired in December, he oversaw a win against Trinidad & Tobago to reach the Copa and two World Cup qualifiers against Panama in March.

PERU (2 Copa wins, last in 1975)

Just as happened in 2011, third place in last year's Copa proved a false dawn as soon as the World Cup qualifiers began. Out of the World Cup since 1982, Peru have an appalling away record and it is 12 years since they won a qualifier on the road.

A generation with the strike force of Paolo Guerrero, Claudio Pizarro and Jefferson Farfan should have done better – and coach Ricardo Gareca has made it clear that he is at the end of his tether.

"I'm excessively patient," says Gareca, "because I always believe in recuperating the player. But everything has a limit, and there are decisions that I have to take because the functioning of the team is the most important thing."

The Copa is his opportunity to regroup and it will be fascinating to see which direction he moves in.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Cristian Benavente
Spanish-born son of a Peruvian mother, the Real Madrid-produced attacking midfielder is currently in Belgium with Charleroi.

▼ THE COACH

Ricardo Gareca
Ex-Argentina striker whose goal ensured that Peru would not qualify for Mexico 86. Took charge after the last World Cup.

GROUP C

MEXICO (0 Copa wins)

After being forced by CONCACAF to send understrength sides to the last two Copa Americas, Mexico will arrive in the USA at full force, albeit with their share of controversies.

Absent from the squad are strikers Giovani Dos Santos and Carlos Vela, whose decisions to bow out of the tournament has generated a plethora of criticism for a lack of commitment to the national team.

The team will therefore be led by Javier Hernandez, who had a fine season in the Bundesliga.

There is confidence in Mexico that this team can reach at least the semi-finals of the Copa and *El Tri* will play every game in front of a partisan crowd.

However, without a true world-class talent, it seems likely that they will once again fall short of winning the tournament.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Javier Hernandez
Rejected by Real Madrid and Manchester United, "*Chicharito*" has bounced back in style with Bayer Leverkusen in Germany.

▼ THE COACH

Juan Carlos Osorio
The Colombian was far from the fans' first choice when appointed, but he has won them over with the team's performances of late.

URUGUAY (15 Copa wins, last in 2011)

Without ever being at full strength, Oscar Tabarez's side are top of the World Cup qualification table – and much of that is down to the work he has carried out since taking over 10 years ago.

Uruguay's priority was to groom youngsters through the under-20 side and then feed them into the senior ranks, and Tabarez has quietly and successfully managed to do this.

The Copa, therefore, looked like an ideal opportunity to accelerate this process and give those under-20 graduates more experience in competitive games. Yet Tabarez has instead decided to call up the old guard.

With Uruguay in action every summer since 2013, and with a punishing US travel schedule, will the decision harm players when the World Cup campaign resumes?

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Matias Vecino
A product of the under-20 side, the central midfielder was introduced in March to bolster an area where Uruguay need renovation.

▼ THE COACH

Oscar Tabarez
Enjoying a successful second spell as boss, "*El Maestro*" is a qualified teacher who has brought Uruguay back to the top table.

JAMAICA (0 Copa wins)

The "Reggae Boyz" won many plaudits on their Copa debut a year ago, giving Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay a run for their money, despite losing each game 1-0.

And with a more favourable group this time around, hopes are high that they can engineer a way into the last eight.

Yet since becoming the first Caribbean side to qualify for the CONCACAF Gold Cup Final last summer, their form has slipped and World Cup qualifying performances and results have been far from convincing, taking only four points from four outings so far.

Relying heavily on overseas-based players such as Wes Morgan and Jobi McAnuff, and the tactical thinking of Winfried Schafer, there are those within the camp who feel six points from a possible nine is well within their capabilities.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Wes Morgan
Who would ever have thought that Jamaica would have an English Premier League-winning captain in the heart of their defence?

▼ THE COACH

Winfried Schafer
An intelligent coach with a fiery temperament, who is under pressure following a poor World Cup qualifying campaign.

VENEZUELA (0 Copa wins)

Bottom of the World Cup qualification table, the unhappy reign of Noel Sanvicente ended in March when he was replaced by former international goalkeeper Rafael Dudamel.

"We have to restore the dream," proclaims Dudamel. "Being last in the table doesn't correspond with the capacity of our players.

"What most motivates me is that we have an extraordinary generation, with a balance between youth and experience."

In addition to being criticised for poor man-management, Sanvicente also tried to adopt a more aggressive style – which left a slow defensive line exposed. As well as boosting morale, Dudamel has tried to adopt a more viable idea of play.

Venezuela's push to qualify for the 2022 World Cup starts here.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Romulo Otero
Midfielder and free-kick specialist who was on target in both of Venezuela's World Cup qualifiers at the end of March.

▼ THE COACH

Rafael Dudamel
One-time flamboyant international keeper, appointed at the start of April, who was previously in charge of the youth sides.

GROUP D

ARGENTINA (14 Copa wins, last one 1993)

The country's long wait for a senior title is a significant plus point for the 2016 Copa as Argentina will use the Olympics to bring on youngsters and therefore be at full strength in the USA, even though Lionel Messi is due in a Spanish court just a few days before the opening game.

After an appalling start to World Cup qualification, Gerardo Martino's side have picked up and now lie third after three straight wins. Even so, two questions arise: will the attacking stars, by far the team's strongest suit, still be fresh at the end of the European season? And can coach Martino make his 4-3-3 system work?

When the attack shines it can be exhilarating, although some quicker centre-backs would help Martino consolidate his idea of play, which he says is his main priority.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Lionel Messi
Can he finally end his search for a senior international title? How much gas is left in the tank? And will he be affected by the tax charges?

▼ THE COACH

Gerardo Martino
Replaced Alejandro Sabella after the World Cup. Took Paraguay to the quarter-finals of South Africa 2010.

CHILE (1 Copa win, in 2015)

A competition that looked an inconvenience takes on a different light for the holders after the acrimonious resignation of coach Jorge Sampaoli at the start of the year.

His replacement, Juan Antonio Pizzi, was thrown in at the deep end, with two World Cup qualifiers at the end of March, but now has more time to work with the players and impose his own style.

While there is little chance of seeing the back three employed by Sampaoli, the use of a target-man centre-forward is highly likely.

Pizzi does, however, face a dilemma. With Chile's greatest generation heading towards their third World Cup, and with the Confederations Cup – as last year's Copa winners – coming up next year, might his senior players benefit from a complete break this summer?

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Charles Aranguiz
Dynamic midfielder who was the hero of last year's Copa Final but missed most of this season with Bayer Leverkusen through injury.

▼ THE COACH

Juan Antonio Pizzi
Argentinian-born, former Spain centre-forward who stepped in after Jorge Sampaoli's turbulent resignation at the start of the year.

PANAMA (No Copa wins)

The obituary of Panama's golden generation has been written several times in recent years, but the lingering remnants will once more step forward in the US.

Recent near misses include a run to the 2013 Gold Cup Final, where they narrowly lost 1-0 to the USA, and a 3-2 loss to the same opposition, who scored twice in injury time, that cost them a place in the play-offs for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. However, they secured their place at the Copa by beating Cuba 4-0 in January.

Three of those four goals were scored by 31-year-old Gabriel Gomez, 34-year-old Luis Tejada and Blas Perez, who is 35.

But there is a crop of young guns emerging and there are high hopes for teenage striker Ismael Diaz and 24-year-old centre-half Harold Cummings.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Blas Perez
This will surely be the 35-year-old striker's last big competition. So often the hero, he carries the hopes of the nation on his shoulders.

▼ THE COACH

Hernan Dario Gomez
Colombian, known as "The Truncheon", who once landed himself in hot water for punching a woman outside a bar.

BOLIVIA (1 Copa win, in 1963)

Last year Bolivia reached the Copa quarter-finals for the first time since 1997. Since then, though, it has been downhill all the way.

Coach Mauricio Soria was sacked and then refused to be re-instated, so Julio Cesar Baldivieso came in – and promptly fell out with key players. And then hopes of making it to Russia 2018 probably died when, after fighting back to 2-2 at home to Colombia, Bolivia went down to a late goal.

Worried about a lack of preparation time for the Copa, Baldivieso floated the idea of taking an experimental young squad to the USA. Fearing a fiasco, administrators tried to bring forward the end of the domestic league in order to give the coach more time to work with his players.

Anything that Bolivia get from the tournament will be a bonus.

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Yasmani Duk
Something of a late developer, the well-built striker has been one of the few bright sparks in a poor start to the World Cup qualifiers.

▼ THE COACH

Julio Cesar Baldivieso
A fiery character as a player and coach, he has not had a smooth ride since taking over after last year's Copa America.

Country profiles by Tim Vickery except: Costa Rica, Panama (Bryan Kay); Haiti, Jamaica (Nathan Carr); Mexico (Martin Del Palacio Langer); USA (Mike Woitalla).

APRIL 13 - MAY 17, 2016

Global diary

A comprehensive record of recent events around the world

Derby joy... Rangers celebrate

Wednesday April 13

ENGLAND: West Ham United's last-ever FA Cup game at Upton Park – before they move to the Olympic Stadium next season – ends in a 2-1 defeat to Manchester United.
FRANCE: The French Football Federation announces that Karim Benzema will not be considered for Euro 2016 selection due to the ongoing investigation into a plot to blackmail national team-mate Mathieu Valbuena over a sex tape.
GERMANY: Bayern Munich beat Benfica 3-2 over two legs in the Champions League to reach a European semi-final for a club-record fifth season in a row.
SPAIN: Two goals from Antoine Griezmann knock holders Barcelona out of the Champions League as Atletico Madrid overturn a 2-1 first-leg deficit to win 3-2 on aggregate.
TURKEY: Fenerbahce draw 0-0 at Galatasaray in the Istanbul derby after the original game in March was postponed in the wake of a bomb attack on the city.

Thursday April 14

ENGLAND: Having drawn 1-1 away in their Europa League quarter-final, Liverpool twice come from two goals behind to beat Borussia Dortmund 4-3 in the return with a stoppage-time winner from Dejan Lovren.
GREECE: The government lifts its suspension of the Greek Cup after FIFA's threat of an international ban. The competition was stopped in March after violence at a semi-final between PAOK and Olympiakos.
UKRAINE: Darijo Srna plays a club record 486th game for Shakhtar Donetsk as they reach the semi-finals of the Europa League with a 4-0 victory over Braga.

Friday April 15

IRAN: Persepolis beat Tehran rivals Esteghlal 4-2 in the Surkhabi derby to go a point clear at the top of the table with four games to play.

Saturday April 16

ENGLAND: Aston Villa's 28-year stay in the top flight is over as they lose 1-0 at Manchester United. Watford goalkeeper Heurelho Gomes saves two penalties in the 1-0 win at West Bromwich Albion.
GERMANY: Robert Lewandowski ends a run of six games without a goal for club and country with two in 12 second-half minutes as Bayern Munich beat Schalke 3-0.
MALAWI: Defending champions Nyasa Big Bullets miss a penalty and are held to a goalless draw on the opening day of the new Super League season by Moyale Barracks.

Sunday April 17

GERMANY: Christian Pulisic opens the scoring in Borussia Dortmund's 3-0 win over Hamburg to become, at 17 years and 212 days, the fourth-youngest scorer in the Bundesliga.
GREECE: Marcus Berg scores five times as Panathinaikos thrash Panthrakikos 6-1.
INDIA: Bengaluru beat Salgaocar 2-0 to become I-League champions.
ITALY: Parma, who were wound up last summer with debts of more than €200m, return to the professional ranks as the reborn club clinch promotion to the third tier with a 2-1 victory over Delta Calcio Rovigo.
PARAGUAY: William Mendieta gets a nine-minute hat-trick as Olimpia come from three goals behind to win 5-3 away to Deportivo Capiata.
SCOTLAND: Rangers beat Celtic on penalties after drawing 2-2 in the Scottish Cup semi-finals.
SPAIN: Argentinian striker Lionel Messi scores his 500th career goal for club and country as Barcelona go down 2-1 at home to Valencia and suffer a third successive league loss.

Monday April 18

ENGLAND: Chelsea retain the UEFA Youth League, beating Paris Saint-Germain 2-1 in the Final.
SLOVENIA: Olimpija coach Marko Nikolic, who was banned for the rest of the season after racially abusing one of his players, parts company with the league leaders.

Tuesday April 19

ENGLAND: Manchester City's Sergio Aguero scores his 100th league goal for the club as they draw 1-1 away at Newcastle United.
NORTHERN IRELAND: Crusaders retain the league title for the first time in their history with a 3-1 win over Cliftonville.

Wednesday April 20

CHINA: A goalless draw between Sydney and Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds eliminates holders Guangzhou Evergrande at the Champions League group stage.
ENGLAND: Liverpool stretch their unbeaten run against Everton at Anfield to 17 years with a 4-0 win in Reds' manager Jurgen Klopp's ➤

Double...Antoine Griezmann beats Barcelona keeper Marc-Andre Ter Stegen as Atletico Madrid reach the Champions League semi-finals

AUSTRALIA

SIMON HILL

Amor wins A-League

Spaniard's Adelaide United are domestic champions

Top dogs...Adelaide United are A-League champions for the first time

A minimal marketing budget, few big-name players, supporter boycotts and a hostile media may sound like a recipe for disaster, but the 11th season of the A-League was arguably the best ever, in terms of both quality and excitement.

With America, and increasingly China, offering the sort of money A-League clubs can only dream about, the fear was that a lack of "marquee" players at the start of the season would hurt the competition irreparably. Yet crowds and TV ratings displayed only a small decline – which is remarkable considering the league gets little media traction and fans staged a mid-season revolt in protest at the response of Football Federation Australia (FFA) to one of the few stories that consistently gets a run in the local press: crowd trouble.

Although there were some isolated issues with fan behaviour, the coverage regularly outweighs the size of the problem. When FFA CEO David Gallop failed to defend the majority of well-behaved supporters against a tirade of over-the-top media outrage, the fans voted with their feet. Thankfully, the boycott lasted only one week, after FFA hastily backtracked and instigated a proper appeals system for banned fans.

> **The 11th season of the A-League was arguably the best ever, in terms of both quality and excitement**

On the pitch, Adelaide United staged a remarkable comeback to win a Premiership that had four contenders up until the final weekend. Bottom in November, United rallied under new coach Guillermo Amor and the Spaniard's street smarts, learned at Barcelona, earned plaudits all round, with the team rounding off the season by claiming their first championship in front of 50,000 at the Adelaide Oval.

Western Sydney Wanderers were equally impressive. Ninth last term, when hampered by Champions League and Club World Cup commitments, coach Tony Popovic responded with a total rebuild. His new-look side – which included a trio of Spaniards in Dimas, Alberto and Andreu – finished runners-up and earned a spot in the Grand Final for the third time in their four-year history. However, they were second best on the day and were deservedly beaten 3-1 by Amor's side.

Brisbane Roar began the campaign in financial disarray but, after renewed commitment from their Indonesian owners, they rallied under John Aloisi, who enjoyed a renaissance of his own after failing at what is now Melbourne City. Roar finished third, in part thanks to Jamie Maclaren's 20 goals – and only missed out on the Premiership after failing to beat Melbourne Victory on the last day of the regular season. They then succumbed to Wanderers in the Elimination semi-final – in which they led 3-0 but eventually lost 5-4 after extra time.

Melbourne City probably underachieved even though they had the league's top scorer Bruno Fornaroli (who set a new A-League record with 25 goals). City scored a new league record of 66 goals but conceded just as frequently and bowed out to Adelaide in the finals.

Perth Glory had a marked change in fortunes. After being dumped from the finals last year due to salary-cap indiscretions, they were in the bottom half for much of the season until some astute signings in the January window revived them. The excellent Diego Castro, voted player of the season, scored 13 times, but a hamstring injury hampered him badly during their finals loss to Melbourne City, after finishing fifth.

Defending champions Melbourne Victory started brightly but fell away, in part due to the illness of captain Carl Valeri. His return late in the season steadied the ship and Victory sneaked into the finals in sixth place, but their title was surrendered as they lost 2-1 in Brisbane.

Of the rest, last season's beaten Grand Finalists Sydney set a club record of 11 games without a win, Newcastle Jets remain in FFA hands, Wellington Phoenix were sidetracked by a battle with FFA over a 10-year extension to their licence and Central Coast Mariners picked up a first-ever wooden spoon. WS

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE
SIX IN A ROW FOR CITY

Double...Micah Lea'alafa

Auckland City set an all-time record for any continental club competition as they were crowned champions of Oceania for a sixth successive season.

Having seen their domestic dominance ended when Team Wellington won the New Zealand title earlier in the year, they gained revenge at the end of the 12-team, two-week tournament on home soil with a 3-0 victory over their compatriots in the Final, thanks to goals from Micah Lea'alafa (two) and Clayton Lewis.

After the club's eighth OFC title in total, coach Ramon Tribulietx said of beaten finalists Team Wellington: "It feels good, coming from losing a Final against them in a [domestic] competition we dominated. We had that extra little bit of motivation."

➤ first Merseyside derby.
FRANCE: The day after Marseille suspend Michel and appoint Franck Passi as caretaker coach, they reach the French Cup Final with a 1-0 victory over Sochaux.
GERMANY: Borussia Dortmund will meet Bayern Munich in the German Cup Final on May 21 after beating Hertha Berlin 3-0.
ITALY: Francesco Totti comes on as an 86th-minute substitute and scores twice as Roma come from behind to beat Torino 3-2.
KENYA: The organising committee for the African Nations Under-20 Cup disqualify Kenya for fielding five overage players in the game against Sudan, on April 3, which ended 1-1.
MEXICO: America win 2-0 at Tigres in the first leg of the CONCACAF Champions League Final with second-half goals from Dario Benedetto and Osvaldo Martinez.
NEW ZEALAND: Wellington Phoenix, who have been granted a 10-year extension to play in Australia's A-League, sign a contract with Chinese company Huawei that is said to be worth $2m a season – making it the richest sponsorship deal in New Zealand football history.
SCOTLAND: Celtic announce that Ronny Deila will step down as manager at the end of the season.
SPAIN: Luis Suarez scores four times as Barcelona win 8-0 at Deportivo La Coruna.

Thursday April 21

SPAIN: Barcelona unveil plans for a revamped 105,000-capacity Camp Nou, with construction due to begin in 2017 and the stadium ready in time for the 2021-22 season.

Friday April 22

FRANCE: Dijon's promotion to Ligue 1 is confirmed as Le Havre draw 1-1 at Evian.
HONG KONG: Eastern wrap up the league championship, with a game to spare, thanks to a 2-1 victory over South China.
ITALY: Eusebio Di Francesco signs a new contract that sees him remain as Sassuolo coach until June 2019.

Saturday April 23

ENGLAND: Anthony Martial scores in the third minute of injury time as Manchester United beat Everton 2-1 and reach the FA Cup Final for a record-equalling 19th time. Liverpool defender Mamadou Sakho is being investigated by UEFA for a failed drugs test after a Europa League game with Manchester United.
FRANCE: Paris Saint-Germain add the League Cup to their Ligue 1 ➤

Taiwan

STEVE MENARY

No club culture

Every league game is on TV, but with little support

Having replaced Chen Kuei-jen, who was forced to quit after the team were whitewashed in the second round of qualifying for the 2019 Asian Cup, Taiwan's new national coach, Toshiaki Imai of Japan, faces a tough task to revitalise football in the island nation.

Victory over Cambodia in June's two-legged qualifier would keep Taiwan's qualifying hopes alive, but there are few expectations that a side ranked 182 in the world will reach the finals. And even if they did, the impact would be marginal.

In a country where baseball, basketball and martial arts dominate, football barely registers.

"Football is lacking in popularity and general interest in the local league is low," says Matt Ward, who coached at club side Royal Blues from 2012 until last year.

To stimulate interest in Taiwan's eight-team league, the Chinese Taipei Football Association (CTFA) agreed a deal with Freedom Sports to record every league game and broadcast highlights.

It was a rare moment of progress for the CTFA, which is widely blamed for football's low standing.

"Our FA fail to devote much into advertisement and promotion.

"As a result, people who go to the stadium are mainly players' relatives or acquaintances," says Royal Blues executive officer Ethan Wei Wang.

Royal Blues are a rare success story in progressing from amateur level to the top flight, where they comfortably survived in their debut campaign this term, finishing fifth.

The man behind much of this success is Robert Iwanicki, a German former mobile-phone engineer who, when his contract elapsed in Taiwan, stayed on to coach football.

Spanish start..Yaki Yen (right) in action against Thailand

Export...Chen Po-liang (left) plays his club football in China

> "There is no real club culture in Taiwan. The Royal Blues are the only league team which deserves to be called a club"
> German coach Robert Iwanicki

"There is no real club culture in Taiwan," says Iwanicki. "The Royal Blues are the only league team which deserves to be called a club."

Other teams are part of larger organisations, ranging from electronic giant Tatung to the plethora of sides with links to universities or arms of the state, such as 2015-16 champions Taipower, who are part of the government-owned Taiwan Power Company.

"The players possess the identity of a civil servant in early times," explains national-team liaison manager Billy Hsiao. "Most of the players nowadays are contractual employees. It is not a team, more like a club inside an enterprise."

Matt Ward adds: "It's a semi-pro league. Teams with financial support like Tatung and Taipower mostly train like pros but everything else is based on semi-pro."

To become a full-time player, Taiwanese footballers must go abroad. With most Taiwanese speaking only Mandarin and no football agents in Taiwan this is not easy, but some have made the leap.

National-team midfielder Chen Po-liang plays for Hangzhou Greentown, while Chen Hao-wei and Wen

Chih-hao are in China with Beijing Enterprises.

But the route into China's burgeoning game became harder in January when the Chinese FA ruled that players from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau are now considered overseas players.

With most members of Taiwan's national team lacking wider international experience, the CTFA has recruited some overseas-based players, and turning out for the land of their parents proved a fillip for Yaki Yen and Onur Durgan.

Yen was born to a Taiwanese father in Spain, where he played in the lower leagues before making his Taiwan debut last year and subsequently earning a contract with Chinese Super League side Changchun Yatai.

Turkish-born striker Durgan played in his homeland before moving in 2010 to Taiwan, where he won the 2013 title with Tatung. He made his national team debut in 2014 only to fall out of favour, but this season he has joined Chinese side Meizhow Keija.

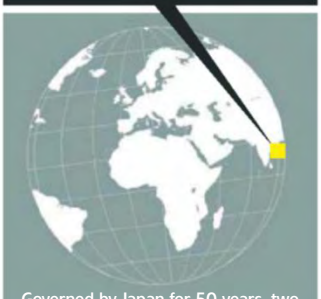
For more locals to emulate the likes of Chen Po-liang and Durgan, greater investment in facilities is needed but the low standing of football makes this unlikely.

"The biggest obstacle is the lack of pitches," argues Iwanicki. "To start developing football, the government need to invest into new pitches with lights, where people can also play after work or school. Due to the geographical position, it is always dark after 6.30pm and people who would love to play football can't because they have nowhere to go.

"I have seen people playing in the dark or using cars to light up the pitches [but] you can find a basketball court with lights in every school.

"Taiwan's government need to build more pitches, If you ask directly at government offices, you will get always the same ignorant answer: 'nobody plays football in Taiwan, we don't need pitches." WS

WHERE IN THE WORLD?



Governed by Japan for 50 years, two million nationalists fled communist rule on the mainland after World War Two and formed a rival government to the Chinese People's Republic.

Size: 35,980 sq km
Population: 23.4 million
Capital: Taipei
Language: Mandarin, Min
Religion: Buddhist, Taoist

➤ title with a 2-1 victory over Lille.

ITALY: Internazionale's 3-1 win over Udinese is the first-ever Serie A game with no Italians starting for either team.

NEW ZEALAND: Auckland City beat Team Wellington 3-0 to win the OFC Champions League for sixth season in a row and eighth time overall.

SPAIN: Luis Suarez becomes the first player to score four goals in successive Liga games as Barcelona beat Sporting Gijon 6-0.

Sunday April 24

ARGENTINA: Boca Juniors are held 0-0 at home by River Plate as the *Superclasico* finishes goalless for a second successive game.

AUSTRALIA: Western Sydney Wanderers come from 3-0 down to beat Brisbane Roar 5-4 in extra time in the Final series semi-finals.

ENGLAND: Leicester City's Riyad Mahrez is the PFA Player of the Year. Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Dele Alli is voted Young Player of the Year.

GERMANY: Eintracht Frankfurt's 2-1 victory against local rivals Mainz relegates Hanover.

HOLLAND: Feyenoord win the Dutch Cup, beating Utrecht 2-1 in the Final.

OMAN: Having started the final day of the season joint top, Fanja win the title with a 2-0 victory over closest challengers Al Suwaiq.

SAUDI ARABIA: Al Ahli claim the league title for a third time with a 3-1 win over Al Hilal.

TURKEY: The ref is attacked and the game abandoned after Trabzonspor fans invade the pitch with their team losing 4-0 at home to Fenerbahce.

UKRAINE: Dynamo Kiev retain the championship with a 1-0 win against Vorskla Poltava.

Monday April 25

FRANCE: Nantes confirm coach Michel Der Zakarian will leave the club at the end of the season.

ICELAND: Valur beat reigning league champions FH on penalties after a 3-3 draw in the season-opening Super Cup.

ITALY: A 1-0 loss for Napoli at Roma hands the Serie A title to Juventus for a fifth successive season. Hours after their dramatic 2-1 victory over Milan, Verona are relegated as Carpi beat Empoli 1-0.

Tuesday April 26

COLOMBIA: Atletico Nacional draw 0-0 away to Huracan of Argentina in their last-16 first leg and have now kept clean sheets in all seven of their Libertadores Cup games this year.

CROATIA: Three people – reported to be former Dinamo Zagreb chief ➤

➤ executive Zdravko Mamic; club coach Zoran Mamic; and ex-executive Damir Vrbanovic – are charged with tax evasion and siphoning off profits from player transfers.

ENGLAND: An inquest concludes that the 96 football fans who died in the 1989 Hillsborough disaster were unlawfully killed. In their first ever European Cup/Champions League semi-final, Manchester City draw 0-0 at home to Real Madrid.

Wednesday April 27

AFC CUP: With one round to go, Johor Darul Ta'zim of Malaysia beat Myanmar's Ayeyawady United 2-1 to remain the only club in the group stage with a 100 per cent record.

BRAZIL: There are three blanks for Brazilian sides in the first leg of the Libertadores Cup last 16 as Atletico Mineiro and Corinthians are held 0-0 away to Racing of Argentina and Uruguay's Nacional respectively, while Gremio lose 1-0 at home to Rosario Central.

GREECE: PAOK fail to turn up for their semi-final second leg against Olympiakos as owner Ivan Savvidis pulls his team out of the Greek Cup as his request for a foreign referee to take charge is not met.

MEXICO: America beat domestic rivals Tigres 4-1 on aggregate to win the CONCACAF Champions League for a record seventh time.

SERBIA: National coach Radovan Curcic has his contract terminated by mutual consent, which prompts national-team director Savo Milosevic to step down.

SPAIN: Saul Niguez scores the only goal of the game as Atletico Madrid win 1-0 at home to Bayern Munich in the first leg of their Champions League semi-final.

SWEDEN: Gothenburg's home game with Malmo is abandoned at 0-0 with 12 minutes remaining after a firework explodes under the feet of the visitors' substitute Tobias Sana.

Thursday April 28

ARGENTINA: Defending champions River Plate lose 2-0 in Ecuador to Independiente del Valle in the first leg of their Libertadores Cup last-16 tie, while Boca Juniors beat Cerro Porteno 2-1 in Paraguay.

CYPRUS: APOEL beat AEK Larnaca 2-0 and retain the championship with two games to spare.

ENGLAND: Liverpool are ordered to pay a record English tribunal fee of £6.5million, with a possible £1.5m in add-ons, to Burnley for forward Danny Ings.

SPAIN: In the Europa League semi-finals, holders Sevilla draw 2-2 at ➤

ECUADOR

TIM VICKERY

Libertadores giant-killers

Independiente del Valle reach the quarter-finals

The end of the Premier League season in England brought some relief for Swansea City's Ecuadorian winger Jefferson Montero. At least now he will no longer turn up bleary eyed for midweek training sessions after staying awake into the small hours to cheer on the club who formed him as they make extraordinary progress in the Libertadores Cup.

Independiente del Valle are a tiny outfit from the outskirts of Quito, Ecuador's mountain capital. Their rickety little stadium has a capacity just over 7,000 and they have only been in their country's top flight since 2010. Yet this is the club who knocked out the reigning champions, Buenos Aires powerhouse River Plate, to march into the last eight of South America's premier club competition.

The rise and rise of Independiente is based on the successful application of a model that gives top priority to grooming young players: the club either develops its own or picks up youthful prospects from elsewhere.

Uruguayan coach Pablo Repetto, in charge since September 2012, tries to help the youngsters by thrusting responsibility onto a couple of his experienced compatriots, such as defender Christian Nunez and central midfielder Mario Rizotto, who are both solid, journeymen whose roles are to provide leadership. And the club's scouting and youth-development departments are clearly working efficiently. So far Ecuador international Montero is their most successful graduate, but others should follow.

The 22-year-old playmaker Junior Sornoza, who had a spell with Pachuca in Mexico but has since returned, is a fine striker of the ball, though he may lack the dynamism to shine at the highest level. His deputy, Gabriel Cortez, also shows promise, while 19-year-old left-winger Bryan Cabezas is quick, strong and talented. Four years older, Jefferson Orejuela has blossomed into a proficient central midfielder, full of lung power and happy to take responsibility. He was named in Ecuador's provisional list of 40 for the Copa America and it would be harsh indeed if he is not included in the final 23.

Ecuador's squad may also find room for the Independiente centre-back pairing. For a few years now this has been something of a problem position, but in the current Libertadores campaign the lanky Arturo Mina, 25, has come of age, and his partner, Luis Caicedo, 24, has also impressed. And they have needed to stand tall as Independiente had to pull out two desperate rearguard actions in order to reach the quarter-finals.

Making it into the knockout stage

> "He really knows how to get his message across to the players, and he's instilled a winning mindset in us"
> Dani Azcona on coach Pablo Repetto

Challenge... Luis Caicedo battles against River Plate in Buenos Aires

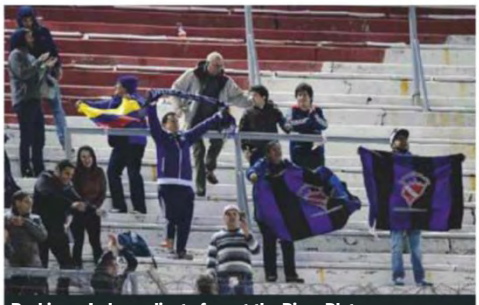
Miss...Guarani's Rodrigo Lopez (hidden) puts his penalty over the bar

was dependent on avoiding defeat in their final group game, away to Chile's Colo Colo, and Mina was in superb form as they sent a packed Santiago crowd away frustrated after a goalless draw. Then, defending a 2-0 lead against River Plate, they had to put up with a ferocious onslaught from the holders. They rode their luck, with veteran keeper Dani Azcona making some fine saves, and went through 2-1 on aggregate.

That this group of players have demonstrated the character necessary to go into some of South America's historic arenas and come out on top will not have come entirely as a surprise for those who have followed the fortunes of this plucky little club.

In their first Libertadores campaign, two years ago, they came very close to making it out of a group which included that year's champions, San Lorenzo of Argentina. But in 2015 they went out in the qualifying round – which very nearly happened again this year. In the last kick of the second-leg tie, Guarani's vastly experienced Uruguayan forward Rodrigo Lopez ballooned a penalty high into the Paraguayan skies.

Had it gone in, Independiente would have been out, but they soon proved themselves worthy of their place, playing out two fine group games with Atletico Mineiro, the most impressive Brazilian side in the competition this year. In Belo Horizonte, Independiente quickly went a goal down, but provided stiff opposition for the rest of the match as they lost 1-0. In Sangolqui, just outside Quito, they won the return 3-2 – which, until their final group game loss to Sao Paulo, was the only defeat Atletico had suffered in the tournament. WS



Backing....Independiente fans at the River Plate away game

➤ Shakhtar Donetsk and Villarreal win 1-0 at home to Liverpool.

Friday April 29

ITALY: Crotone draw 1-1 at Modena and are promoted to Serie A for the first time.
QATAR: Abderrazak Hamdallah scores a last-minute penalty as El Jaish beat Lekhwiya 2-1 in the Qatar Cup Final.

Saturday April 30

CHILE: Universidad Catolica win the clausura title on the last day of the season, beating Audax Italiano. O'Higgins, who started the day two points clear at the top, lose 2-1 to Universidad de Concepcion and finished third, behind Colo Colo.
CZECH REPUBLIC: Viktoria Plzen secure a fourth league title and extend their Czech top-flight record run to 16 consecutive wins with a 2-0 victory against Banik Ostrava.
GIBRALTAR: Lincoln thrash relegated Angels 13-1 to win the league for the 14th year in a row.
JORDAN: Despite losing 3-1 to Al Jazeera, Al Wehdat are champions for a third successive season as Al Faisaly lose 1-0 at Al Baqa'a.
SWITZERLAND: Basle wrap up a seventh consecutive championship with a 2-1 win against Sion.

Sunday May 1

AUSTRALIA: Adelaide United are A-League champions for the first time, beating Western Sydney Wanderers 3-1 in the Grand Final.
AZERBAIJAN: Qarabag beat Zire 2-0 to win a third successive title.
CROATIA: Dinamo Zagreb clinch an 11th successive title with Rijeka's goalless draw at home to RNK Split.
GERMANY: Hanover's 19-year-old striker Niklas Feierabend is killed in a road traffic accident.
MALAYSIA: Melaka United's 18-year-old Australian-born goalkeeper Stefan Petrovski, who was struck by lightning during a training session in April, passes away.
PERU: Edison Flores' bicycle kick secures a 1-0 victory over second-placed Sporting Cristal and makes Universitario the apertura winners.
ROMANIA: Steaua Bucharest's 1-1 draw with Pandurii Targu Jiu sees Astra Giurgiu win the championship for the first time.

Monday May 2

ENGLAND: Tottenham Hotspur's 2-2 draw with Chelsea means Leicester City are crowned champions. Leicester's Jamie Vardy is the Football Writers' Footballer of The Year. Relegated last season, ➤

AFC Champions League

JOHN DUERDEN

Holders go out

Big-spending Chinese flop in the Champions League

Despite starting this year by spending around $150million on star names such as Jackson Martinez of Atletico Madrid, Chelsea's Ramires and Alex Teixeira from Shakhtar Donetsk, Chinese sides Jiangsu Suning and Guangzhou Evergrande both crashed out of the 2016 Asian Champions League at the group stage.

As the winner of every Chinese Super League title since 2011, and two of the last three continental titles, holders Guangzhou Evergrande's exit was the most surprising. Just six months after winning the title at home to Al Ahli of the UAE, Luiz Felipe Scolari's team were eliminated with a game to spare.

This is a club that takes being the best and biggest in Asia very seriously. The passport the Champions League provides to the Club World Cup is vital for their long-term plans to become one of the top 20 teams in the world.

The media has been quick to criticise Scolari's conservative tactics and team selections, while the signing of Martinez has not yet been successful. The Colombian has so far failed to gel with the rest of the team after his prolific predecessor Elkeson was surprisingly sold to domestic rivals Shanghai SIPG. Guangzhou Evergrande's form in the league has at least helped Scolari to keep his job, but he is under pressure.

Jiangsu's exit was not such a shock. Although they undertook a huge financial outlay, the club are not a traditional powerhouse and the team finished mid-table last season, qualifying for the continental tournament by virtue of a cup win. Teixeira and Ramires did impress in the Champions League, but Dan Petrescu's men dropped points in Vietnam and at home against Tokyo. The club from Nanjing has, however, been going well at home in the league, although a title would be regarded as a massive achievement.

Shanghai SIPG, led by Sven Goran Eriksson, had few problems winning their group, helped by four goals from Elkeson – a fact that did not go unnoticed by Guangzhou fans. Shandong Luneng and coach Mano Menezes also made it through despite poor domestic form.

From the eastern zone, there are also two teams each from Japan, Australia and South Korea in the knockout stage.

Over...Guangzhou Evergrande defend a free-kick from Urawa Reds' Yosuke Kashiwagi

> "It is a big achievement considering we've had five attempts. On our fifth one we were successful and that joy right now overrides trying to analyse the performance"
>
> Melbourne Victory coach Kevin Muscat on reaching the Champions League knockout stage

Victory...Melbourne's Archie Thompson (right) and Besart Berisha

Sydney and Melbourne Victory made it through for the first time, with Victory coach Kevin Muscat claiming: "It is a big achievement considering we've had five attempts. On our fifth one we were successful and that joy right now overrides trying to analyse the performance."

South Korea are coming to terms with the fact that they no longer dominate the tournament, yet the K-League is the only league that has sent two teams to the knockout stage in each of the last five years. Seoul were perhaps the most impressive performer in the group phase, scoring 17 goals, with Brazilian star Adriano on target 10 times.

Gamba Osaka – who, in 2008, were the last Japanese team to reach the Final – didn't win a game, while J.League champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima were almost as disappointing. With only Urawa Reds and Tokyo going

Out...Jiangsu (in blue) fail to overcome Tokyo

through, there has been talk of the J.League changing its schedule to match the European season in order to help clubs in the Asian Champions League. However, the current calendar does not seem to be a problem for Chinese and Korean sides.

Any one of the eight eastern teams could make it to the Final where they will meet a team from the western regions, which comprises two teams from Iran, United Arab Emirates and Qatar, as well as one each from Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan. WS

➤ Burnley are back in the top flight with a 1-0 victory over QPR.
GERMANY: Stuttgart extend their record for own goals in a Bundesliga season to seven as Federico Barba scores at the wrong end in a 6-2 defeat at Werder Bremen.
POLAND: Legia Warsaw beat Lech Poznan 1-0 in the Polish Cup Final.
RUSSIA: Hulk scores two penalties as Zenit beat CSKA Moscow 4-1 to win the Russian Cup.
SCOTLAND: Dundee United lose 2-1 at neighbours Dundee and are relegated from the Premiership.
WALES: The New Saints secure a second successive domestic treble with a 2-0 victory over Airbus UK Broughton in the Welsh Cup Final.

Tuesday May 3

EGYPT: Having led the club to the group phase of the AFC Champions League, former Scotland manager Alex McLeish leaves Zamalek after just 65 days and 10 matches.
SERBIA: Red Star beat Vozdovac 1-0 to win the league title.
SPAIN: Atletico Madrid lose 2-1 at Bayern Munich in the Champions League semi-finals to draw 2-2 on aggregate and reach the Final on away goals.
UEFA: Kosovo is awarded UEFA membership after federations voted 28-24 in favour of accepting the former province of Serbia. French Football Federation director general Florence Hardouin becomes UEFA's first female executive member.

Record...Bayern Munich make it four Bundesliga titles in a row

Wednesday May 4

ARGENTINA: Despite beating Independiente del Valle of Ecuador 1-0, defending champions River Plate lose 2-1 on aggregate in the Libertadores Cup round of 16.
LIECHTENSTEIN: Vaduz thrash Schaan 11-0 in the Cup Final.
SPAIN: Real Madrid are 1-0 winners at home to Manchester City and will face city rivals Atletico in a repeat of the 2014 Champions League Final.

Thursday May 5

EURO U17s: A competition-record crowd of 33,000 watch Portugal beat hosts Azerbaijan 5-0 on the opening day of the tournament.
SERBIA: Slavoljub Muslin is appointed national coach.
SPAIN: Europa League holders Sevilla beat Shakhtar Donetsk 5-3 on aggregate to reach a third successive Final. In the other semi-final, Villarreal surrender a 1-0 first-leg lead and lose 3-0 at Liverpool.

Friday May 6

GERMANY: Borussia Dortmund midfielder Ilkay Gundogan dislocates a kneecap during training and will miss Euro 2016.
ITALY: Marco Verratti will miss Euro 2016 as he needs surgery to fix a groin problem.
ROMANIA: Dinamo Bucharest's 26-year-old Cameroon midfielder Patrick Ekeng collapses in the 70th minute of the league game against Viitorul Constanta and is pronounced dead in hospital two hours later.

Saturday May 7

AUSTRIA: A 1-1 draw with Sturm Graz secures Salzburg their third consecutive title.
BELGIUM: Manchester City defender Vincent Kompany rules himself out of the Euro finals with a thigh injury.
BOSNIA: Zrinjski lift the title with a 3-0 victory against Mladost.
FRANCE: Edinson Cavani scores a hat-trick as Paris Saint-Germain win 4-0 at GFC Ajaccio to set a new Ligue 1 record of 92 points with two games remaining.
GERMANY: Bayern Munich become the first team to win the Bundesliga for four consecutive seasons with a 2-1 win at Ingolstadt.
HUNGARY: Ferencvaros complete a domestic double as Zoltan Gera's late goal gives them a 1-0 win over Ujpest in the Hungarian Cup Final.

Sunday May 8

HOLLAND: Ajax's 1-1 draw away at De Graafschap sees PSV win the title with a 3-1 victory at Zwolle.
ITALY: Francesco Totti comes off the bench to make his 600th league appearance for Roma in their 3-0 win at home to Chievo.
MACEDONIA: Vardar win the league with a 2-0 victory over Shkupi.
SCOTLAND: Celtic claim their fifth consecutive Premiership title with a 3-2 victory over Aberdeen.
SLOVAKIA: Trencin are crowned champions with an emphatic 4-0 win away to closest challengers Slovan Bratislava.
TANZANIA: Simba's 1-0 loss at ➤

➤ home to Mwadui sees Young Africans retain the league title.
UAE: Al Ahli are champions for a seventh time thanks to a 5-0 thrashing of Al Shaab.

Monday May 9

UEFA: Michel Platini officially steps down as UEFA president after failing to have his six-year ban overturned.

Tuesday May 10

BULGARIA: Having been winning 2-0, Levski Sofia's 3-2 defeat at home to Lokomotiv Plovdiv hands Ludogorets a fifth consecutive league championship.
CROATIA: Dinamo Zagreb complete the domestic double with a 2-1 win over Slaven Belupo Koprivnica in the Croatian Cup Final.
RUSSIA: Youth-team coach Sergei Chikishev takes temporary charge of Dynamo Moscow as Andrey Kobelev departs with the club one point off the relegation play-off zone.

Wednesday May 11

BRAZIL: Substitute Michel Bastos scores the only goal of the game as Sao Paulo beat Atletico Mineiro in the opening leg of their Libertadores Cup quarter-final.
ENGLAND: Sunderland beat Everton 3-0 to relegate Norwich City and arch-rivals Newcastle United. Arsenal announce England striker Danny Wellbeck will be out for nine months with a ruptured cartilage.
HOLLAND: Frank De Boer leaves Ajax after six years as coach.
ITALY: Gianluigi Buffon agrees a new contract that will see the goalkeeper remain with Juventus beyond his 40th birthday.
SCOTLAND: Dundee United, who have already been relegated from the Premiership, are docked three points for fielding two unregistered players against Inverness Caledonian.
SERBIA: Partizan beat Javor 2-0 to win the Serbian Cup for the first time since 2011.

Thursday May 12

ARGENTINA: Rosario Central end the unbeaten run of Colombia's Atletico Nacional in the Libertadores Cup with a 1-0 win in their quarter-final first leg. Boca Juniors draw 1-1 with Nacional in Uruguay.
ENGLAND: Mauricio Pochettino signs a new five-year contract as manager of Tottenham Hotspur.

Mexico

MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER

America are regional champions yet again

Champions League winners now target the Club World Cup

With America making it a Mexican success in the CONCACAF Champions League for an 11th consecutive campaign, no confederation can boast a dominance that comes even close to that of the Liga MX in North, Central America and the Caribbean.

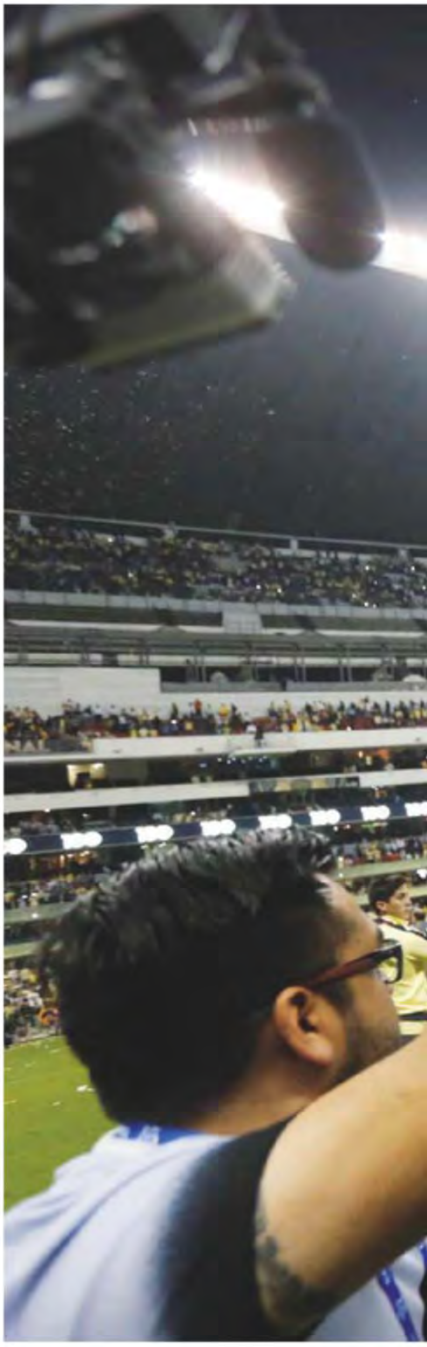
This time round, however, history was made as four teams from Mexico met four from MLS in the quarter-finals – a draw that was interpreted in the region as a referendum on how the US league has closed the gap with its southern neighbours.

Yet when the showdown was over, the answer left no room for doubt, with four Mexican sides through to the semis. Even modest Queretaro, who eventually finished 13th in the domestic league, had no problem disposing of DC United.

The results prompted much soul-searching among supporters and the media in the United States, with the general consensus being that the resumption of the tournament after the winter break in March tends to favour Mexican teams, whose season is just getting underway, and hurts American sides, who are only beginning their pre-season work. The salary cap and designated-player systems of MLS also tend to produce teams in which there are two or three good players and a huge core of poor ones, with no middle class. If you compare player by player, despite the likes of Steven Gerrard, Kaka and Alberto Gilardino, even the weakest team in Liga MX is worth more than the best from across the border.

As so to this year's Champions League semi-finals, where Tigres – who were Libertadores Cup finalists just a few months ago and have the firepower of French international striker Andre-Pierre Gignac – disposed of Queretaro without too much trouble

Success...America celebrate retaining their CONCACAF Champions League title



Everton sack Roberto Martinez.

Friday May 13

FIFA: Fatma Samba Diouf Samoura of Senegal is appointed FIFA's first female secretary general.

Saturday May 14

GERMANY: Stuttgart lose 3-1 away to Wolfsburg and are relegated for the first time in 41 years.
ITALY: Gonzalo Higuain scores a hat-trick in Napoli's 4-0 win against Frosinone to set a Serie A record of 36 goals for the campaign.
MONTENEGRO: Mladost win the title for the first time with a 2-1 victory at closest challengers Budocnost.
SPAIN: Luis Suarez scores a hat-trick in a 3-0 win at Granada to seal Barcelona's 24th La Liga title and finish top scorer with 40 goals.

Sunday May 15

BELGIUM: Club Brugge are crowned champions with a 4-0 win against second-placed Anderlecht.
BRAZIL: Corinthians start their title defence with a goalless draw at home to Gremio – the first time in 32 games they have failed to score.
POLAND: Legia Warsaw win the title on the last day of the season with a 3-0 win against Pogon Szczecin.
PORTUGAL: Benfica claim the title with a 4-1 victory over Nacional.
TURKEY: Besiktas confirm their first championship in seven years with a 3-1 win against Osmanlispor.

Monday May 16

BULGARIA: CSKA Sofia, who were demoted to the third tier last year due to financial problems, say they have been told they will be allowed back into the top flight next season.
DENMARK: Copenhagen complete the double, wrapping up the league with a 2-0 win over Nordsjaelland.
ITALY: National coach Antonio Conte is acquitted of failing to report an attempt to fix a match against AlbinoLeffe when boss of Siena.
MACEDONIA: Shkendija win the Macedonian Cup for the first time, beating Rabotnicki 3-0.

Tuesday May 17

GREECE: AEK deny Olympiakos a fourth double in five years with a 2-1 victory in the Greek Cup Final.
ROMANIA: CFR Cluj beat Dinamo Bucharest on penalties in the Romanian Cup Final. WS

Champ...America's Oribe Peralta lifts the trophy

Stopped...DC United failed to overcome Queretaro (in white)

to reach the Final for the first time in their history.

Meanwhile, holders America, who are considered to be Mexico's richest team, were held to a goalless draw over 180 minutes by a young but talented Santos Laguna.

Twelve minutes into the first leg of extra time at the Azteca Stadium, Santos' Argentinian goalkeeper Agustin Marchesin somehow managed to let a weak shot from Ecuadoran international Michael Arroyo slip between his hands and *Las Aguilas* were through to their second consecutive Final.

In the end, the match-up between the two most powerful teams in the competition turned out to be something of a non-event.

America were superior in both games, winning 2-0 away at the Estadio Universitario with goals from Dario Benedetto and Oswaldo Martinez. Tigres did take the lead in the return, through Gignac, but goals from Arroyo and Martinez settled the tie.

America will now head for their second consecutive Club World Cup, with the task of taking revenge for their failure last year – when they lost to Chinese side Guangzhou Evergrande – and ending a bad run of results for Mexican teams in the competition. WS

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

HOW IT WORKS

Every month, journalists from each member of the European Sports Media group select their first XI based on the best individual performances from Europe's top competitions. For details of how each ESM member voted, visit worldsoccer.com/esm11

APRIL

ESM – EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

The members of ESM are: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Elf* (Holland), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allegmeine Zeitung* (Germany), *Goal News* (Greece), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *So Foot* (France), *Sport* (Belgium), *Sport Express* (Russia), *De Telegraaf* (Holland), *TIPSbladet* (Denmark), *World Soccer* (England). More details of votes at **worldsoccer.com/esm11**

Club football

SOUTH AMERICA

LIBERTADORES CUP

Group 1

Feb17
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0
The Strongest (Bol) 1 (Alonso 62)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Diaz de Vivar (Par)

Feb 25
Trujillanos (Ven) 0
River Plate (Arg) 4 (Pisculichi 55, Gonzalez 63, Alonso 78, 90+1)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Zambrano (Ecu)

Mar 2
The Strongest 2 (Escobar 18, Cristaldo 32)
Trujillanos 1 (Cabezas 38)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Murillo (Col)

Mar10
River Plate 1 (Thiago Mendes og 32)
Sao Paulo 1 (Ganso 17)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Bascunan (Chl)

Mar16
The Strongest 1 (Chumacero 90)
River Plate 1 (Mora 18)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Quintana (Par)
Sent off: Ponzio (River Plate) 90+1; Ramallo (The Strongest) 90+2

Mar16
Trujillanos 1 (Rojas 36)
Sao Paulo 1 (Ganso 38)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Lamouroux (Col)

Apr 5
Sao Paulo 6 (Calleri 13, pen 50, 80, 87, Kelvin 18, Joao Schmidt 25)
Trujillanos 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Mereles (Par)

Apr 6
River Plate 6 (D'Alessandro 14, Fernandez 25, 83, Mayada 30, Mammana 42, Alario 45+1)
The Strongest 0
HT: 5-0. **Ref:** Lamouroux (Col)

Apr12
Trujillanos 2 (Sosa 32, Cova pen 90+4)
The Strongest 1 (Alonso 67)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Polic (Chl)
Sent off: Pereyra (The Strongest) 89

Apr13
Sao Paulo 2 (Calleri 28, 60)
River Plate 1 (Alonso 83)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Cunha (Uru)
Sent off: Vangioni (River Plate) 64; Joao Schmidt (Sao Paulo) 87

Apr 21
River Plate 4 (D'Alessandro 9, pen 19, Mayada 49, Alario 71)
Trujillanos 3 (Cova 30, Gonzalez 74, Cabezas pen 78)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Carrillo (Per)
Sent off: Mendoza (Trujillanos) 36

Apr 21
The Strongest 1 (Cristaldo 29)
Sao Paulo 1 (Calleri 44)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Tobar (Chl)
Sent off: Denis 90+3, Calleri (from the bench) 90+8 (both Sao Paulo)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 1 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
R Plate (Arg) (Q)	6	3	2	1	17	7	11
Sao Paulo (Q)	6	2	3	1	11	5	9
The Strongest	6	2	2	2	6	11	8
Trujillanos	6	1	1	4	7	18	4

Group 2

Feb16
River Plate (Uru) 2 (Santos pen 51, Montelongo 64)
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Jean 35, Gabriel Jesus 58)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Bascunan (Chl)

Feb 25
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Larrondo pen 90+2)
Nacional (Uru) 1 (Lopez 56)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)
Sent off: Cabaco (from the bench) 56, Victorino 90+3 (both Nacional)

Mar 2
Nacional 0
River Plate 0
Ref: Carrillo (Per)

Mar 3
Palmeiras 2 (Cristaldo 25, Allione 90+4)
Rosario Central 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Caceres (Par)

Mar 9
Palmeiras 1 (Gabriel Jesus 45+4)
Nacional 2 (Lopez 38, Barcia 41)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Osses (Chl)
Sent off: Fucile 44, Leo Gamalho 90+3 (both Nacional)

Mar 9
Rosario Central 4 (Ruben 19, 61, 71, Herrera 57)
River Plate 1 (Santos 64)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Mereles (Par)

Mar17
Nacional 1 (Lopez 50)
Palmeiras 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Vera (Ecu)

Mar17
River Plate 1 (Santos 12)
Rosario Central 3 (Donatti 14, Aguirre 51, Cervi 90+2)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Argote (Ven)

Apr 6
Rosario Central 3 (Donatti 33, Cervi 51, Ruben pen 66)
Palmeiras 3 (Gabriel Jesus 5, 45, Barrios 77)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Zambrano (Ecu)
Sent off: Gabriel Jesus (Palmeiras) 73

Apr 7
River Plate 2 (Tajan 5, Gonzalez og 81)
Nacional 2 (Victorino 8, Ramirez 72)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Caceres (Par)

Apr14
Nacional 0
Rosario Central 2 (Donatti 44, Herrera 70)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Garcia (Mex)

Apr14
Palmeiras 4 (Egidio 19, Allione 45+4, 73, Alecsandro pen 81)
River Plate 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Maldonado (Bol)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 2 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rosario C (Q)	6	3	2	1	13	8	11
Nacional (Q)	6	2	3	1	6	6	9
Palmeiras	6	2	2	2	12	8	8
R Plate (Uru)	6	0	3	3	6	15	3

Group 3

Feb 24
Deportivo Cali (Col) 0
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0
Ref: Cortez (Bra)

Feb 24
Racing (Arg) 4 (Lopez 11, R Martinez 28, De Paul 33, Acuna 83)
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (Arce 88)
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Mereles (Par)

Mar 3
Boca Juniors 0
Racing 0
Ref: Ricci (Bra)

Mar 3
Bolivar 5 (Arce 4, 19, 78, Capdevila 40, R Cardozo 73)
Deportivo Cali 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Orbe (Ecu)

Mar10
Bolivar 1 (Saavedra 28)
Boca Juniors 1 (Carrizo 90+5)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Cunha (Uru)

Mar17
Deportivo Cali 2 (Roa 10, Sambueza 33)
Racing 2 (Grimi 61, Lopez 72)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Haro (Per)
Sent off: Cerro (Racing) 84; Lozano (Dep Cali) 90+2

Apr 7
Boca Juniors 3 (Gago 33, Tevez 43, Carrizo 49)
Bolivar 1 (Callejon pen 72)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Carrillo (Per)

Apr 7
Racing 4 (Grimi 7, Lopez 27, Romero 38, R Martinez 81)
Deportivo Cali 2 (Roa 49, Perez 90+1)
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Lopes (Bra)

Apr13
Racing 0
Boca Juniors 1 (Lodeiro 84)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Vera (Ecu)

Apr14
Deportivo Cali 1 (Lozano 4)
Bolivar 1 (Cellerino 67)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Quintana (Par)

Apr 20
Boca Juniors 6 (Fabra 17, Tevez 38, 72, Chavez 48, Jara 79, Palacios 87)
Deportivo Cali 2 (Casierra 36, 37)
HT: 2-2. **Ref:** Ferreyra (Uru)
Sent off: Mera (Dep Cali) 70

Apr 20
Bolivar 1 (Cellerino 69)
Racing 1 (R Martinez 73)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Guerrero (Mex)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 3 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Boca Jnrs (Q)	6	3	3	0	11	4	12
Racing (Q)	6	2	3	1	11	7	9
Bolivar	6	1	3	2	10	10	6
Dep Cali	6	0	3	3	7	18	3

Group 4

Feb18
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (Rodriguez 75)
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Aguiar 40)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)

Feb 23
Huracan (Arg) 0
Atletico Nacional (Col) 2 (Moreno 44, Berrio 82)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Tobar (Chl)
Sent off: Mancinelli (Huracan) 72

Mar1
Atletico Nacional 3 (Sanchez 12, Copete 33, Moreno 74)
Sporting Cristal 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Maldonado (Bol)

Mar1
Penarol 0
Huracan 1 (Romero Gamarra 8)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Ramos (Mex)

Mar 8
Atletico Nacional 2 (Bocanegra 55, Moreno 61)
Penarol 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Lopes (Bra)
Sent off: Novick (Penarol) 86

Mar 8
Sporting Cristal 3 (Costa 25, Silva 35, pen 56)
Huracan 2 (Abila 57, 77)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Diaz de Vivar (Par)
Sent off: Sosa (Huracan) 54

Mar15
Penarol 0
Atletico Nacional 4 (Copete 8, Bocanegra 45+1, Berrio 82, Ruiz 85)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Bascunan (Chl)

Apr 5
Huracan 4 (Abila 24, 30, Romero Gamarra 68, Miralles 84)
Sporting Cristal 2 (Silva 16, Calcaterra 43)
HT: 2-2. **Ref:** Claus (Bra)

Apr12
Huracan 0
Penarol 0
Ref: Ponce (Ecu)
Sent off: Nandez (Penarol) 22

Apr12
Sporting Cristal 0
Atletico Nacional 1 (Ibarbo pen 13)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Soto (Ven)

Apr19
Atletico Nacional 0
Huracan 0
Ref: Osses (Chl)

Apr19
Penarol 4 (Aguiar 30, Novick 72, 81, Albarracin 85)
Sporting Cristal 3 (Rodriguez 18, 24, Avila 37)
HT: 1-3. **Ref:** Oliveira (Bra)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 4 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
At Nacional (Q)	6	5	1	0	12	0	16
Huracan (Q)	6	2	2	2	7	7	8
Penarol	6	1	2	3	5	11	5
Sp Cristal	6	1	1	4	9	15	4

Group 5

Feb17
Melgar (Per) 1 (O Fernandez 14)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Rafael Carioca 21, Patric 39)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Lamouroux (Col)

Feb18
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Orejuela 66)
Colo Colo (Chl) 1 (Paredes 63)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Argote (Ven)

Feb 24
Atletico Mineiro 1 (Pratto 4)
Independiente del Valle 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Rapallini (Arg)

Feb 24
Colo Colo 1 (Paredes 65)
Melgar 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Quintana (Par)

Mar1
Melgar 0
Independiente del Valle 1 (Sornoza 36)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Rojas (Uru)

Mar10
Colo Colo 0
Atletico Mineiro 0
Ref: Vargas (Bol)

Mar15
Independiente del Valle 2 (Sornoza 3, Jose Angulo 47)
Melgar 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Orozco (Bol)

Mar16
Atletico Mineiro 3 (Cazares 2, Patric 45+1, Hyuri 73)
Colo Colo 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Soto (Ven)

Apr 6
Independiente del Valle 3 (Cabezas 6, Sornoza 21, pen 40)
Atletico Mineiro 2 (Junior Urso 10, Pratto pen 49)
HT: 3-1. **Ref:** Herrera (Arg)

Apr 7
Melgar 1 (Cuesta 49)
Colo Colo 2 (Paredes 69, 72)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sanchez (Col)

Apr14
Atletico Mineiro 4 (Tiago 1, Robinho 8, Pratto pen 17, Carlos 69)
Melgar 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Valenzuela (Ven)

Apr14
Colo Colo 0
Independiente del Valle 0
Ref: Loustau (Arg)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 5 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
At Mineiro (Q)	6	4	1	1	12	4	13
Indep Valle (Q)	6	3	2	1	7	4	11
Colo Colo	6	2	3	1	4	5	9
Melgar	6	0	0	6	2	12	0

Group 6

Feb17
Toluca (Mex) 2 (Triverio 46, pen 77)
Gremio (Bra) 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Vargas (Bol)
Sent off: Velasco (Toluca) 36

Feb 23
LDU Quito (Ecu) 2 (Morales 50, 90+2)
San Lorenzo (Arg) 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Fuentes (Uru)

Mar 2
Gremio 4 (Maicon 12, Bolanos 37, Henrique Almeida 83, Everton 89)
LDU Quito 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Valenzuela (Ven)
Sent off: Romero (LDU Quito) 47

Mar 2
San Lorenzo 1 (Ortigoza pen 12)
Toluca 1 (Esquivel 13)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Osses (Chl)

Mar 9
Gremio 1 (Fred 26)
San Lorenzo 1 (Cauteruccio 33)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Fedorczuk (Uru)

Mar10
LDU Quito 1 (Hidalgo 48)
Toluca 2 (Tenorio og 42, Uribe 85)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Lamouroux (Col)

Mar15
San Lorenzo 1 (Ortigoza pen 4)
Gremio 1 (Lincoln 90)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Cunha (Uru)

Apr 5
Toluca 2 (Vega 19, Triverio 63)
LDU Quito 1 (Puch 18)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Argote (Ven)

Apr12
Toluca 2 (Uribe 82, 88)
San Lorenzo 1 (Blandi 44)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)

Apr13
LDU Quito 2 (Quinteros 46, Cevallos 77)
Gremio 3 (Douglas 13, Bobo 26, Walace 52)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Tobar (Chl)

Apr19
Gremio 1 (Ramiro 16)
Toluca 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Murillo (Col)

Apr19
San Lorenzo 1 (Avila 81)
LDU Quito 1 (Cevallos 47)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Mereles (Par)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 6 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Toluca (Q)	6	4	1	1	9	5	13
Gremio (Q)	6	3	2	1	10	6	11
San Lorenzo	6	0	4	2	5	8	4
LDU Quito	6	1	1	4	7	12	4

Group 7

Feb16
Tachira (Ven) 2 (Mosquera 42, Perez Greco 62)
Olimpia (Par) 1 (Nunez 79)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Lopes (Bra)
Sent off: Rolon (Olimpia) 41

Feb18
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 4 (Sosa 1, Veron 23, Alcoba 69, Mina og 73)
Emelec (Ecu) 2 (Mena 18, 67)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Haro (Per)
Sent off: Cabrera (Pumas) 64

Feb 25
Emelec 2 (Herrera pen 81, Stracqualursi 84)
Tachira 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Orozco (Bol)
Sent off: Lujano (Tachira) 86

Mar1
Olimpia 0
Pumas UNAM 2 (Quinones 52, Sosa 70)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Delfino (Arg)

Mar 8
Emelec 2 (Gimenez 4, 90)
Olimpia 2 (Paniagua 12, B Riveros 21)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)

Mar 9
Tachira 2 (Herrera 7, Cermeno 44)
Pumas UNAM 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Balino (Arg)

Mar17
Olimpia 4 (C Riveros 31, Silva pen 55, Bareiro 73, Caballero 90+2)
Emelec 2 (Guanca 20, P Quinonez 71)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Herrera (Arg)

Mar17
Pumas UNAM 4 (Alcoba 31, Ruiz 53, Sosa 61, 86)
Tachira 1 (Perez Greco 82)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Marques (Bra)

Apr 5
Tachira 1 (Angel 21)
Emelec 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ferreyra (Uru)

Apr 6
Pumas UNAM 4 (Alcoba 47, Britos 50, Herrera 55, Sosa 69)
Olimpia 1 (C Riveros 21)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Bascunan (Chl)
Sent off: Leguizamon (Olimpia) 62

Apr13
Emelec 2 (Matamoros 45+1, Guanca pen 72)
Pumas UNAM 3 (Martinez 12, 61, Quinones 35)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Rapallini (Arg)

Apr13
Olimpia 4 (Vargas 18, Torres 40, Bareiro 60, Mencia 63)
Tachira 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Vuaden (Bra)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 7 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pumas (Q)	6	5	0	1	17	8	15
Tachira (Q)	6	3	0	3	6	11	9
Olimpia	6	2	1	3	12	12	7
Emelec	6	1	1	4	10	14	4

Group 8

Feb16
Santa Fe (Col) 0
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0
Ref: Garcia (Mex)

Feb17
Cobresal (Chl) 0
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Escalona og 90+1)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Cunha (Uru)

Feb 25
Cerro Porteno 2 (Santana 50, Luis Leal 52)
Cobresal 1 (Maldonado 62)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Pitana (Arg)

Mar 2
Corinthians 1 (Guilherme 65)
Santa Fe 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Vigliano (Arg)

Mar 9
Cerro Porteno 3 (Beltran 49, 82, Diaz 75)
Corinthians 2 (Andre 13, Giovanni Augusto pen 88)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Haro (Peru)
Sent off: Andre 52, Rodriguinho 73 (both Corinthians)

Mar 9
Cobresal 1 (Poblete 89)
Santa Fe 2 (Jerez og 17, Salazar 34)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Zambrano (Ecu)
Sent off: Ibarguen (Santa Fe) 66

Mar15
Santa Fe 3 (Gomez 8, 40, Tesillo 74)
Cobresal 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Maldonado (Bol)

Mar16
Corinthians 2 (Lucca 23, Mareco og 61)
Cerro Porteno 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Loustau (Arg)

Apr 6
Santa Fe 1 (Otero 45+3)
Corinthians 1 (Elias 58)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Pitana (Arg)

Apr13
Cobresal 2 (Maldonado 86, Jerez 90+5)
Cerro Porteno 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Orozco (Bol)

Apr 20
Cerro Porteno 1 (Alonso 34)
Santa Fe 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Lopes (Bra)
Sent off: Balanta19, Mina 59 (both Santa Fe)

Apr 20
Corinthians 6 (Marlone 9, 39, Romero 13, 77, Guilherme Arana 45, Elias 75)
Cobresal 0
HT: 4-0. **Ref:** Orbe (Ecu)

LIBERTADORES CUP – GROUP 8 – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Corinthians (Q)	6	4	1	1	13	4	13
C Porteno (Q)	6	3	1	2	6	7	10
Santa Fe	6	2	2	2	6	4	8
Cobresal	6	1	0	5	4	14	3

● *Top 2 in each group qualified for1st knockout rnd*

1st knockout round
1st legs
Apr 26
Huracan 0
Atletico Nacional 0
Ref: Polic (Chl)

Apr 26
Tachira 1 (Mosquera 50)
Pumas UNAM 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Maldonado (Bol)
Sent off: Alatorre (Pumas) 69

Apr 27
Gremio 0
Rosario Central 1 (Ruben 14)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Carrillo (Per)

Apr 27
Nacional 0
Corinthians 0
Ref: Loustau (Arg)

Apr 27
Racing 0
Atletico Mineiro 0
Ref: Quintana (Par)

Apr 28
Cerro Porteno 1 (Dominguez pen 84)
Boca Juniors 2 (Tevez 29, Lodeiro 60)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Chacon (Mex)

Apr 28
Independiente del Valle 2 (Jose Angulo 64, Sornoza pen 90+2)
River Plate (Arg) 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Lopes (Bra)

Apr 28
Sao Paulo 4 (Michel Bastos 27, Centurion 45, 61, Thiago Mendes 53)
Toluca 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Fuentes (Uru)
Sent off: Vega (Toluca) 88

2nd legs
May 3
Atletico Nacional 4 (Ibarbo pen 24, Guerra 58, 68, Copete 90+3)
Huracan 2 (Espinoza 26, Abila 77)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Argote (Ven)
Sent off: Mancinelli (Huracan) 52
Atletico Nacional 4-2 on agg

May 3
Pumas UNAM 2 (Herrera 13, Sosa 81)
Tachira 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Polic (Chl). *Sent off: Mora (Tachira) 87*
Pumas UNAM 2-1 on agg

May 4
Atletico Mineiro 2 (Carlos 16, Pratto 72)
Racing 1 (Lopez pen 22)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Fedorczuk (Uru)
Atletico Mineiro 2-1 on agg

May 4
Corinthians 2 (Lucca 15, Marquinhos Gabriel pen 90+4)
Nacional 2 (Lopez 5, Romero 57)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Pitana (Arg). *Sent off: Fagner (Corin's) 90*
Agg 2-2; Nacional on away goals

May 4
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Alario 79)
Independiente del Valle 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)
Independiente del Valle 2-1 on agg

May 4
Toluca 3 (Uribe 18, 87, Triverio 61)
Sao Paulo 1 (Michel Bastos 51)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Lamouroux (Col)
Sent off: Centurion (Sao Paulo) 90+2
Sao Paulo 5-3 on agg

May 5
Boca Juniors 3 (Tevez pen 4, Pavon 73, Perez 89)
Cerro Porteno 1 (R Rojas 12)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)
Sent off: Valdez (Cerro Porteno) 86
BocaJuniors 5-2 on agg

May 5
Rosario Central 3 (Ruben 5, pen 24, Donatti 57)
Gremio 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Caceres (Par)
Rosario Central 4-0 on agg

PERU

2016 – APERTURA STAGE – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario[1]	15	11	2	2	31	12	35
Sp Cristal	15	7	5	3	21	11	26
Alianza Lima	15	8	2	5	24	18	26
Municipal	15	7	4	4	19	18	25
Melgar	15	7	3	5	24	18	24
Alianza Atl'ico	15	7	2	6	24	21	23
Juan Aurich	15	5	7	3	20	20	22
Real Garcilaso	15	5	5	5	22	22	20
Sp Huancayo	15	4	7	4	14	12	19
U Comercio	15	5	4	6	18	23	19
Co'tes Unidos	15	5	3	7	18	18	18
UT Cajamarca	15	4	6	5	21	23	18
Def La Bocana	15	4	4	7	30	31	16
Ayacucho	15	4	4	7	13	26	16
U San Martin	15	4	2	9	15	26	14
Cesar Vallejo	15	1	4	10	14	29	7

[1]*As stage winners, Universitario qualify for the 2017 Sudamericana Cup*

EUROPE

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-finals
1st legs
Apr 5
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Suarez 63, 74)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Fernando Torres 25)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 88,534. **Ref:** Brych (Ger)
Sent off: Fernando Torres (Atletico Madrid) 35

Apr 5
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Vidal 2)
Benfica (Por) 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 70,000. **Ref:** Marciniak (Pol)

Apr 6
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 2 (Ibrahimovic 41, Rabiot 59)
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (De Bruyne 38, Fernandinho 72)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 47,228. **Ref:** Mazic (Ser)

Apr 6
Wolfsburg (Ger) 2 (Rodriguez pen 18, Arnold 25)
Real Madrid (Spa) 0
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 26,400. **Ref:** Rocchi (Ita)

2nd legs
Apr12
Manchester City 1 (De Bruyne 76)
Paris Saint-Germain 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 53,039. **Ref:** Velasco Carballo (Spa)
Manchester City 3-2 on agg

Apr12
Real Madrid 3 (Cristiano Ronaldo 16, 17, 77)
Wolfsburg 0
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 76,684. **Ref:** Kassai (Hun)
Real Madrid 3-2 on agg

Apr13
Atletico Madrid 2 (Griezmann 36, pen 88)
Barcelona 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 52,851. **Ref:** Rizzoli (Ita)
Atletico Madrid 3-2 on agg

Apr13
Benfica 2 (Jimenez 27, Talisca 76)
Bayern Munich 2 (Vidal 38, Muller 52)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 63,235. **Ref:** Kuipers (Hol)
Bayern Munich 3-2 on agg

Semi-finals
1st legs
Apr 26
Manchester City 0
Real Madrid 0
Att: 52,221. **Ref:** Cakir (Tur)

Apr 27
Atletico Madrid 1 (Saul 11)
Bayern Munich 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 52,127. **Ref:** Clattenburg (Eng)

2nd legs
May 3
Bayern Munich 2 (Xabi Alonso 31, Lewandowski 74)
Atletico Madrid 1 (Griezmann 54)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 70,000. **Ref:** Cakir (Tur)
Agg 2-2; Atletico Madrid on away goals

May 4
Real Madrid 1 (Fernando og 20)
Manchester City 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 78,300. **Ref:** Skomina (Sln)
Real Madrid1-0 on agg

EUROPA LEAGUE

Quarter-finals
1st legs - Apr 7; 2nd legs - Apr14
Athletic Bilbao (Spa) v Sevilla (Spa)
1-2, 2-1 (aet) (agg 3-3, Sevilla 5-4 on pens)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) v Liverpool (Eng)
1-1, 3-4 (agg 4-5)
Sporting Braga (Por) v Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr)
1-2, 0-4 (agg 1-6)
Villarreal (Spa) v Sparta Prague (CzR)
2-1, 4-2 (agg 6-3)

Semi-finals
1st legs - Apr 28; 2nd legs - May 5
Shakhtar Donetsk v Sevilla 2-2, 1-3 (agg 3-5)
Villarreal v Liverpool 1-0, 0-3 (agg 1-3)

CONCACAF

CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Final
1st leg
Apr 20
Tigres (Mex) 0
America (Mex) 2 (Benedetto 49, Martinez 90+3)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Garcia (Mex)
Tigres: Guzman - Jimenez, Ayala, Juninho, Rivas, Damm (Alvarez 61), Pizarro, Jose Torres (Mancilla 70), Aquino, Rafael Sobis (Zelarayan 77), Gignac.
America: Gonzalez - Alvarado, Goltz, Pablo Aguilar, Samudio, Andrade (Mares 88), Guerrero, Martinez, Sambueza, Benedetto (Pimentel 70), Peralta (Diaz 90+2).

2nd leg
Apr 27
America 2 (Arroyo 68, Martinez pen 87)
Tigres 1 (Gignac 39)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Guerrero (Mex)
America 4-1 on agg
America: Gonzalez - Paul Aguilar, Goltz, Pablo Aguilar, Samudio, Andrade (Pimentel 88), Martinez, Sambueza, Quintero (Guerrero 46), Benedetto (Arroyo 65), Peralta.
Tigres: Guzman - Jimenez (F Fernandez 69), Ayala, Juninho, Torres Nilo, Aquino (Zelarayan 82), Duenas, Pizarro, Alvarez (Damm 57), Rafael Sobis, Gignac.

BELIZE

2015-16 Clausura Championship Final
1st leg - Apr 23; 2nd leg - Apr 30
Placencia Assassins v Belmopan Bandits
0-0, 0-2 (agg 0-2)

JAMAICA

2015-16 Championship Final
May 1: Portmore United 1 Montego Bay United 2.

ASIA

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A
Feb 23: Lokomotiv Tashkent (Uzb) 1 Al Ittihad (Sau) 1; Sepahan (Irn) 2 Al Nasr (UAE) 0.
Mar 1: Al Ittihad 1 Lokomotiv Tashkent 1; Al Nasr 2 Sepahan 0.
Mar 15: Al Ittihad 1 Al Nasr 2; Sepahan 0 Lokomotiv Tashkent 2.
Apr 6: Al Nasr 0 Al Ittihad 0; Lokomotiv Tashkent 1 Sepahan 0.
Apr 20: Al Ittihad 4 Sepahan 0; Al Nasr 1 Lokomotiv Tashkent 1.
May 4: Lokomotiv Tashkent 0 Al Nasr 0; Sepahan 0 Al Ittihad 2.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP A – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lok'motiv T (Q)	6	2	4	0	6	3	10
Al Nasr (Q)	6	2	3	1	5	4	9
Al Ittihad	6	2	3	1	9	4	9
Sepahan	6	1	0	5	2	11	3

Group B
Feb 23: Al Nassr (Sau) 3 Bunyodkor (Uzb) 3; Lekhwiya (Qat) 0 Zob Ahan (Irn) 1.
Mar 1: Bunyodkor 0 Al Nassr 1; Zob Ahan 0 Lekhwiya 0.
Mar 16: Al Nassr 1 Lekhwiya 1; Bunyodkor 0 Zob Ahan 0.
Apr 5: Lekhwiya 4 Al Nassr 0; Zob Ahan 5 Bunyodkor 2.
Apr 20: Bunyodkor 0 Lekhwiya 2; Zob Ahan 3 Al Nassr 0.
May 4: Al Nassr 0 Zob Ahan 3; Lekhwiya 0 Bunyodkor 0.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP B – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zob Ahan (Q)	6	4	2	0	12	2	14
Lekhwiya (Q)	6	2	3	1	7	2	9
Al Nassr	6	1	2	3	5	14	5
Bunyodkor	6	0	3	3	5	11	3

Group C
Feb 24: Pakhtakor (Uzb) 2 Al Hilal (Sau) 2; Tractor Sazi (Irn) 4 Al Jazira (UAE) 0.
Mar 2: Al Hilal 4 Pakhtakor 1; Al Jazira 0 Tractor 1.
Mar 15: Al Jazira 1 Al Hilal 1; Pakhtakor 1 Tractor 0.
Apr 6: Al Hilal 1 Al Jazira 0; Tractor 2 Pakhtakor 0.
Apr 19: Al Hilal 0 Tractor 2; Al Jazira 1 Pakhtakor 3.
May 3: Pakhtakor 3 Al Jazira 0; Tractor 1 Al Hilal 2.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP C – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tractor Sazi (Q)	6	4	0	2	10	3	12
Al Hilal (Q)	6	3	2	1	10	7	11
Pakhtakor	6	3	1	2	10	9	10
Al Jazira	6	0	1	5	2	13	1

Group D
Feb 24: Al Ahli (Sau) 2 Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) 1; Al Ain (UAE) 1 El Jaish (Qat) 2.
Mar 2: El Jaish 2 Al Ain 1; Nasaf Qarshi 2 Al Ahli 1.
Mar 16: Al Ain 1 Al Ahli 0; El Jaish 1 Nasaf Qarshi 0.
Apr 5: Al Ahli 1 Al Ain 2; Nasaf Qarshi 0 El Jaish 0.
Apr 19: El Jaish 1 Al Ahli 4; Nasaf Qarshi 1 Al Ain 1.
May 3: Al Ahli 2 El Jaish 0; Al Ain 2 Nasaf Qarshi 0.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP D – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
El Jaish (Q)	6	3	1	2	6	8	10
Al Ain (Q)	6	3	1	2	8	6	10
Al Ahli	6	3	0	3	10	7	9
Nasaf Qarshi	6	1	2	3	4	7	5

Group E
Feb 23: Binh Duong (Vie) 1 Jiangsu Suning (Chn) 1; Jeonbuk Motors (SKo) 2 FC Tokyo (Jap) 1.
Mar 1: Jiangsu Suning 3 Jeonbuk Motors 2; FC Tokyo 3 Binh Duong 1.
Mar 15: Jeonbuk Motors 2 Binh Duong 0; FC Tokyo 0 Jiangsu Suning 0.
Apr 6: Binh Duong 3 Jeonbuk Motors 2; Jiangsu Suning 1 FC Tokyo 2.
Apr 20: Jiangsu Suning 3 Binh Duong 0; FC Tokyo 0 Jeonbuk Motors 3.
May 4: Binh Duong 1 FC Tokyo 2; Jeonbuk Motors 2 Jiangsu Suning 2.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP E – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jeonbuk (Q)	6	3	1	2	13	9	10
FC Tokyo (Q)	6	3	1	2	8	8	10
Jiangsu	6	2	3	1	10	7	9
Binh Duong	6	1	1	4	6	13	4

Group F

Feb 23: Buriram United (Tha) 0 Seoul (SKo) 6; Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jap) 1 Shandong Luneng (Chn) 2.
Mar 1: Seoul 4 Sanfrecce Hiroshima 1; Shandong Luneng 3 Buriram United 0.
Mar 16: Sanfrecce Hiroshima 3 Buriram United 0; Shandong Luneng 1 Seoul 4.
Apr 5: Buriram United 0 Sanfrecce Hiroshima 2; Seoul 0 Shandong Luneng 0.
Apr 20: Seoul 2 Buriram United 1; Shandong Luneng 1 Sanfrecce Hiroshima 0.
May 4: Buriram United 0 Shandong Luneng 0; Sanfrecce Hiroshima 2 Seoul 1.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP F – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Seoul (Q)	6	4	1	1	17	5	13
Shandong (Q)	6	3	2	1	7	5	11
Sanfrecce	6	3	0	3	9	8	9
Buriram Utd	6	0	1	5	1	16	1

Group G

Feb 24: Melbourne Victory (Aus) 2 Shanghai SIPG (Chn) 1; Suwon Bluewings (SKo) 0 Gamba Osaka (Jap) 0.
Mar 2: Gamba Osaka 1 Melbourne Victory 1; Shanghai SIPG 2 Suwon Bluewings 1.
Mar 15: Melbourne Victory 0 Suwon Bluewings 0; Shanghai SIPG 2 Gamba Osaka 1.
Apr 6: Gamba Osaka 0 Shanghai SIPG 2; Suwon Bluewings 1 Melbourne Victory 1.
Apr 19: Gamba Osaka 1 Suwon Bluewings 2; Shanghai SIPG 3 Melbourne Victory 1.
May 3: Melbourne Victory 2 Gamba Osaka 1; Suwon Bluewings 3 Shanghai SIPG 0.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP G – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shanghai (Q)	6	4	0	2	10	8	12
Melb'rne V (Q)	6	2	3	1	7	7	9
Suwon	6	2	3	1	7	4	9
Gamba Osaka	6	0	2	4	4	9	2

Group H

Feb 24: Guangzhou Evergrande (Chn) 0 Pohang Steelers (SKo) 0; Urawa Reds (Jap) 2 Sydney (Aus) 0.
Mar 2: Pohang Steelers 1 Urawa Reds 0; Sydney 2 Guangzhou Evergrande 1.
Mar 16: Guangzhou Evergrande 2 Urawa Reds 2; Pohang Steelers 0 Sydney 1.
Apr 5: Sydney 1 Pohang Steelers 0; Urawa Reds 1 Guangzhou Evergrande 0.
Apr 19: Pohang Steelers 0 Guangzhou Evergrande 2.
Apr 20: Sydney 0 Urawa Reds 0.
May 3: Guangzhou Evergrande 1 Sydney 0; Urawa Reds 1 Pohang Steelers 1.

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP H – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sydney (Q)	6	3	1	2	4	4	10
Urawa Reds (Q)	6	2	3	1	6	4	9
Guangzhou	6	2	2	2	6	5	8
Pohang	6	1	2	3	2	5	5

● *The top 2 in each group have qualified for the 1st knockout round*

AUSTRALIA

2015-16 – REGULAR – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Adelaide (Q)	27	14	7	6	45	28	49
W Sydney (Q)	27	14	6	7	44	33	48
Brisbane (Q)	27	14	6	7	49	40	48
Melb'rne C (Q)	27	13	5	9	63	44	44
Perth (Q)	27	13	4	10	49	42	43
Melb'rne V (Q)	27	11	8	8	40	33	41
Sydney	27	8	10	9	36	36	34
Newcastle	27	8	6	13	28	41	30
Wellington P	27	7	4	16	34	54	25
Central Coast	27	3	4	20	33	70	13

The top 6 qualified for the championship play-offs (the top 2 went directly into the semi-finals)

Elimination finals

Apr 15: Brisbane 2 Melbourne Victory 1.
Apr 17: Melbourne City 2 Perth 0.

Semi-finals

Apr 22: Adelaide 4 Melbourne City 1.
Apr 24: Western Sydney 5 Brisbane 4 (aet).

2015-16 Championship Final

May 1: Adelaide 3 Western Sydney 1.

OMAN

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fanja (C)	26	14	9	3	42	20	51
Al Suwaiq	26	12	12	2	30	20	48
Al Oruba	26	13	8	5	37	17	47
Dhofar	26	10	9	7	37	36	39
Al Nahda	26	10	8	8	31	26	38
Al Nasr	26	9	10	7	22	23	37
Sohar	26	8	11	7	30	26	35
Saham	26	8	9	9	27	28	33
Al Shabab	26	8	7	11	29	40	31
Al Khabourah	26	6	12	8	27	26	30
Muscat	26	7	9	10	30	33	30
Musannah (R)[1]	26	8	5	13	21	31	29
Sur (R)	26	3	12	11	23	34	21
Salalah (R)	26	3	5	18	19	45	14

[1] *Relegated after losing rel/prom play-off*

QATAR

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Rayyan (C)	26	20	2	4	69	23	62
El Jaish	26	14	6	6	48	29	48
Al Sadd	26	13	8	5	54	38	47
Lekhwiya	26	14	2	10	60	41	44
Umm Salal	26	10	11	5	39	34	41
Al Ahli	26	10	7	9	42	40	37
Al Sailiya	26	11	3	12	40	46	36
Al Arabi	26	10	5	11	33	37	35
Al Gharafa	26	9	7	10	33	37	34
Al Khor	26	9	6	11	25	31	33
Al Wakrah	26	9	3	14	34	45	30
Al Kharaitiyat	26	7	6	13	38	47	27
Qatar SC (R)	26	6	9	11	31	51	27
Mesaimeer (R)	26	1	3	22	15	62	6

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahli (C)	26	21	3	2	60	20	66
Al Ain	26	18	3	5	53	24	57
Al Wahda	26	13	4	9	45	28	43
Al Nasr	26	11	8	7	47	36	41
Al Shabab	26	11	7	8	34	27	40
Al Wasl	26	11	6	9	42	36	39
Al Jazira	26	11	4	11	51	50	37
Al Dhafra	26	9	7	10	37	39	34
Bani Yas	26	8	9	9	41	47	33
Dibba	26	8	5	13	32	46	29
Al Sharjah	26	7	7	12	32	40	28
Emirates	26	7	6	13	34	47	27
Al Fujairah (R)	26	7	5	14	43	62	26
Al Shaab (R)	26	1	4	21	22	71	7

AFRICA

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

2nd round

1st legs - Apr 8-10; 2nd legs - Apr19-20

Al Merrikh (Sud) v ES Setif (Alg) 2-2, 0-0 (agg 2-2, ES Setif on away goals); AS Vita (DRC) v Mamelodi Sundowns (SAf) 1-0, 1-2 (agg 2-2, AS Vita on away goals); ASEC Abidjan (IvC) v Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 2-0, 1-2 (agg 3-2); Enyimba (Nga) v Etoile Sahel (Tun) 3-0, 0-3 (agg 3-3, Enyimba 4-3 on pens); Stade Malien (Mli) v Zesco United (Zam) 1-3, 1-2 (agg 2-5); Wydad Casablanca (Mor) v TP Mazembe (DRC) 2-0, 1-1 (agg 3-1); Young Africans (Tan) v Al Ahly (Egy) 1-1, 1-2 (agg 2-3); Zamalek (Egy) v MO Bejaia (Alg) 2-0, 1-1 (agg 3-1)

● *Winners qualify for group stage; losers enter Confederation Cup in play-off round*

CONFEDERATION CUP

2nd round

1st legs - Apr 8-10; 2nd legs - Apr19/20

Al Ahly Shendi (Sud) v Medeama (Gha) 0-0, 0-2 (agg 0-2); Azam (Tan) v Esperance (Tun) 2-1, 0-3 (agg 2-4); CF Mounana (Gab) v ENPPI (Egy) 2-0, 0-2 (agg 2-2, CF Mounana 5-4 on pens); CS Constantine (Alg) v Misr El Makasa (Egy) 1-0, 1-3 (agg 2-3); FUS Rabat (Mor) v SC Villa (Uga) 7-0, 0-1 (agg 7-1); MC Oran (Alg) v Kawkab Marrakech (Mor) 0-0, 0-1 (agg 0-1); Vita Club Mokanda (Con) v Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 1-2, 0-2 (agg 1-4); Zanaco (Zam) v Stade Gabesien (Tun) 1-1, 0-3 (agg 1-4)

● *Winners enter play-off round, where they are joined by the losing teams from the CAF Champions League 2nd round*

NAMIBIA

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tigers (C)	30	20	7	3	46	25	67
Black Africa	30	17	8	5	44	18	59
Tura Magic	30	13	12	5	45	27	51
African Stars	30	13	9	8	33	20	48
Mighty Gun'rs	30	12	8	10	47	41	44
Blue Waters	30	12	8	10	38	32	44
Civics	30	11	10	9	37	33	43
Orlando P'tes	30	12	7	11	35	34	43
Eleven Arrows	30	11	7	12	30	36	40
UNAM	30	10	6	14	38	38	36
Rundu Chiefs	30	9	9	12	32	35	36
Young Chiefs	30	8	8	14	32	38	32
Citizens	30	8	8	14	35	47	32
Utd Stars (R)	30	7	7	16	40	55	28
Julinho (R)	30	7	7	16	28	44	28
Flamingo (R)	30	5	9	16	19	56	24

OCEANIA

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Played in New Zealand

Group A

Apr 10: Auckland City (NZ) 4 Solomon Warriors (Sol) 0; Lae City Dwellers (PNG) 0 Amicale (Van) 3.
Apr 13: Amicale 3 Solomon Warriors 0; Lae City Dwellers 1 Auckland City 2.
Apr 17: Solomon Warriors 5 Lae City Dwellers 4; Auckland City 3 Amicale 1.

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP A – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland C (Q)	3	3	0	0	9	2	9
Amicale	3	2	0	1	7	3	6
Solomon W	3	1	0	2	5	11	3
Lae City D	3	0	0	3	5	10	0

Group B

Apr 9: Team Wellington (NZ) 2 Suva (Fij) 0; Lossi (NC) 1 Hekari United (PNG) 5.
Apr 12: Hekari United 3 Suva 0; Lossi 1 Team Wellington 2.
Apr 16: Suva 3 Lossi 1; Team Wellington 4 Hekari United 0.

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP B – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
T Welli'ton (Q)	3	3	0	0	8	1	9
Hekari Utd	3	2	0	1	8	5	6
Suva	3	1	0	2	3	6	3
Lossi	3	0	0	3	3	10	0

Group C

Apr 8: Nadi (Fij) 1 Tefana (Tah) 6; Kiwi (Soa) 0 Magenta (NC) 2.
Apr 11: Magenta 4 Tefana 2; Kiwi 3 Nadi 4.
Apr 15: Tefana 7 Kiwi 0; Nadi 0 Magenta 3.

OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE – GROUP C – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Magenta (Q)	3	3	0	0	9	2	9
Tefana (Q)	3	2	0	1	15	5	6
Nadi	3	1	0	2	5	12	3
Kiwi	3	0	0	3	3	13	0

● *The 3 group winners and the runner-up with the best record qualified for the semi-finals*

Semi-finals

Apr 20: Auckland City 4 Tefana 2; Team Wellington 2 Magenta 0.

Final

Apr 23 - Auckland (QBE Stadium)
Auckland City 3 (Lea'alafa 2, 84, Lewis 67)
Team Wellington 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 1,500. **Ref:** Jacques (Tah)
Auckland City: Rivas - Berlanga, White, Iwata, Bilen, Kim, Hudson-Wihongi, Lea'alafa, Lewis, Joao Moreira (Tade 86), De Vries.
Team Wellington: Basalaj - Robertson, Hobbs, Feneridis, Neil, Bale, Barcia (Gulley 72), Villa, Jackson, Corrales (Halpin 88), Harris (Bevin 89).
Sent off: Feneridis 83.

KEY TO TABLES
(C) = champions
(R) = relegated
(Q) = qualified for next stage

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World Soccer's GREAT MATCHES

JUNE 26, 1996, WEMBLEY: EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP SEMI-FINAL

England 1 Germany 1

Three Lions' dreams of silverware are crushed once again by German spot-kicks

Opener...Alan Shearer wheels away after putting England ahead

Recalling the 1990 World Cup semi-final, Keir Radnedge began his *World Soccer* report: "History repeated itself as Germany defeated England on penalties to reach the Final of – this time – the European Championship.

"As Andy Moller clipped the decisive, sudden-death spot-kick beyond David Seaman, the old stadium of Wembley, which rarely can have hosted such drama, was engulfed in a stunned silence.

"The 75,000 fans who had come to see England take another excited step towards the trophy they had never won, broke into a long, sustained burst of applause.

"But it was Germany who were the great achievers of the most unforgettable night of the finals."

Both teams played on the front foot, with England time and again knocking on the German door, only for the visitors to keep it bolted, until such time as they could break away and threaten England's defensive trio of Tony Adams, Gareth Southgate and Stuart Pearce.

Throughout the tournament, England fans had adopted Skinner and Baddiel's *Three Lions* song, airing their hopes of "30 years of hurt" – since England won the World Cup – coming to an end.

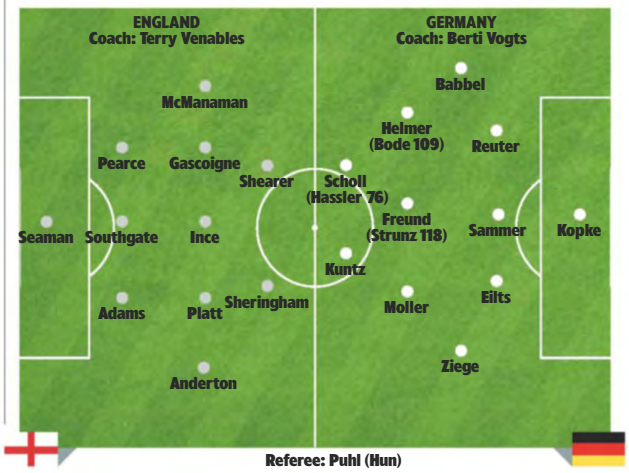
With the scores level after 90 minutes, the match went into "golden goal" extra-time, and Paul Gascoigne was inches from winning the tie. He narrowly failed to reach an Alan Shearer cross as it went across the face of the German goal.

Radnedge continued: "The 120 minutes came to an end with England looking to press forward. It was 1-1, just as it had been in Turin in 1990. Just as in Turin, it came down to penalties.

"Both teams took their first five kicks immaculately.

"Then Southgate, England's outstanding defender in the finals, had his not-very-powerful shot saved by Kopke, and Moller did the rest." WS

Devastated...Stuart Pearce (right) consoles Gareth Southgate



Referee: Puhl (Hun)

KEY MOMENTS

Level...Stefan Kuntz equalises for Germany

2min
A 25-yard shot from Paul Ince is tipped over by keeper Andreas Kopke.

3min
The resulting corner is taken by Paul Gascoigne, flicked on by Tony Adams and Alan Shearer runs in to head home from close range. **1-0**

16min
Andreas Moller plays the ball out to Thomas Helmer on the left, whose first-time cross is stabbed home by Stefan Kuntz. **1-1**

24min
Darren Anderton whips in a cross from the right and Shearer's header misses the bar by inches.

28min
Teddy Sheringham meets Anderton's corner, but his effort is blocked on the line by Stefan Reuter.

92min
Early in extra-time, Anderton's shot hits a post.

95min
Kuntz heads a corner from Moller into the England net, but referee Sandor Puhl disallows it for a foul.

98min
Shearer crosses from the right but Gascoigne, sliding in at the far post, narrowly fails to connect with the ball.

Penalties
Both teams convert their first five penalties, taking the shoot-out into sudden death. Gareth Southgate's tame effort is saved by Kopke, leaving Moller to score. **5-6 (on pens)**

So close...Paul Gascoigne at the far post

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